

The 3rd Sunday in Advent
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Matthew 11:2-10

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“Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.’” (vv. 2-6)

It's happened to just about everyone as a parent or a child. There's a three-way conversation that goes on, maybe even on two levels. One parent sends a child to the other parent with a question or communication, though the first parent knows the answer full well. Maybe the second parent even sends the child back, not only with an answer, but with another communication or question, even though that parent also knows the answer full well. Santa's methods in the chimney, and the details of storks and babies, are two subjects on which this tends to happen.

On a much more profound level, that's what John the Baptist and Jesus are doing in this traditional Gospel reading for the 3rd Sunday in Advent. It's not that John doesn't know the answer to the question he sends with his disciples. It's for the sake of his disciples, that John sends them with a question for Jesus: *“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”*

John doesn't need the question answered for himself. Remember, he's the one who pointed to Jesus and said, *“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* John knew who this son of Joseph and Mary was. Remember, John was the one who said to Jesus, *“I need to be baptized by you. And do you come to me?”* John knew that Jesus of Nazareth was the Savior promised repeatedly throughout the Old Testament. And don't forget that, in the latter half of today's Gospel reading, our Lord gives John the highest praise, saying that he is *“more than a prophet,”* that he is the messenger of the Messiah foretold in Scripture, and that *“among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.”* It sure doesn't sound like John was any less a believer than on the day he started preaching. So John didn't need his question answered for himself.

But John the Baptist also knew that he was sitting in prison because Herod was threatened by him. And he realized that his time on earth as the forerunner of Christ might well be just about up. And it would be very understandable if his disciples were losing faith in everything John the Baptist had preached about the coming Savior, because here was their beloved prophet humiliated, powerless, and sitting in prison. To John's disciples it certainly might have looked like both they and he had hitched their wagons to the wrong horse.

And so, when John heard in prison that Jesus' ministry had begun, when he heard that Jesus had finally begun to preach and teach and do miracles, *“when John heard in prison about the deeds*

of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?''

And how does Jesus answer? He could have simply said, "Yes," and that would have been that. But elsewhere, others were offended when Jesus testified about Himself, claiming to be the Son of God. They called it blasphemy! And whether it was that, or because of the crowds gathered around Him who were listening in on the conversation, or for some other reason, Jesus answers indirectly, using an object lesson. He points to His own public ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing—His ministry that was known throughout Israel. And He replies,

"Go and tell John what you hear and see... (It's the second parent sending the child back to the first parent!) "Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."

Look around you! Behold and listen, O disciples of John. You are wondering whether this man of flesh and blood standing before you is the promised Son of God. Well, have you noticed that wherever I am, there miracles are happening? There, healing is going on? There, people who are discouraged, and downtrodden, and without hope are having good news preached to them and are going away rejoicing and filled with hope? If that is happening wherever I am, what do you think is the answer to your question? You know the Old Testament prophecies about the One who is to come. Isaiah says that when He comes,

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. (35:6)*

And again Isaiah says of the promised Savior that, *"He will bring good news to the poor and bind up the brokenhearted. (61:1).*

So look, and see! Witness the miracles I have already done:

- The Healing of the Leper in Galilee (8:2-4);
- The Healing of the Paralytic in Capernaum (9:2-8);
- The Raising of Jairus' Daughter (9:18-26);
- The Healing of the Two Blind Men (9:27-31), to name just a few.

And now you have found me preaching and teaching among the cities of Israel.

Go and tell John what you hear and see. And in the process, take it to heart yourselves. Because I know you are being tested. I know you are troubled by the inglorious appearance of John's imprisonment. I know that such things cause you doubts, stumbling, weakness of faith, dark nights for the soul. But, yes, I AM the Coming One. And even though my ministry and kingdom lets tensions stand (like John's imprisonment), do know that I will accomplish my saving ministry even through the seemingly weak things of this world (like my own suffering and death). And blessed is the one who is not offended by me!

So what does this Gospel for the 3rd Sunday in Advent have to say to us? Well, the word “Advent” means “coming.” And during Advent, we give attention to and prepare for the coming of Christ in several respects. Of course, we are preparing during these weeks to celebrate our Savior’s first coming at Christmas. And, as we heard last Sunday, Advent it also about being prepared for the Lord’s final coming on the Last Day. But there’s still one more coming of Christ that God’s Word teaches us about during Advent. And that is the way that our Lord comes among us today, in His Church, as we wait for His final appearing.

Like the disciples of John the Baptist, we are all searching for Jesus. We want to know where and how we can find and connect with our loving God promised in Scripture. We want to be able to identify where He is so that we can run to His arms, and call upon Him in trouble, and hide in the shelter of His wings. And this search of ours goes on in the midst of scandal and troublesome things, just like John the Baptist’s sitting in prison. We get sick. We become depressed. We see death all around us. We suffer financially. We suffer emotionally. We have relationships melt down around us. We are guilt-ridden by what we say and do. We are embarrassed by failure or only meager success, according to the world’s standards. We don’t see the success we’d like to see from our sincere efforts to work for God’s kingdom. We don’t know what to say when others ask us the tough questions of life and death.

And in the context of all this scandal, which doesn’t seem consistent with the glory, majesty, and success of God’s kingdom that we envision... in the context of all this we come to the Church, and we find Jesus who has promised to be with us always until the end of the age. We find Jesus who said, “*wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I.*” We find Jesus, who promises to be with us incarnationally, according to His divine and human natures in the Holy Communion. We come here searching, and we ask: “*Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?*”

And Jesus says to you: “Look around you, and see what is going on in my kingdom. Not only do I work miracle upon miracle for your physical blessing—giving the efficacious power to every occurrence in the natural world, giving incredible advances to the healing arts, giving success to treatments and medications, besides working countless unexplained medical miracles... But in my kingdom, I also open eyes and ears to be receptive to my Word and to hear with delight my gracious, Gospel Word of reconciliation between God and men. In my kingdom, through the voice of those whom I send, I preach good news to the poor in spirit who have given up on all self-help and who look to me for what I alone can give. It is the good news of peace between God and man achieved by my perfect life under the Law, beginning in Bethlehem, and culminating with my suffering and death for sinners on the cross of Calvary.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

And cry to her that her warfare is ended,

That her iniquity is pardoned,

The she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” (Isaiah 40:1-2)

Dear disciples, don't be discouraged by how things appear in your life or around you. Don't let John's sitting in prison, or the curse of sin that you experience in this world cause you doubt the awesome things that Christ the Coming One does for you today where He meets you in His Church. Though John the Baptist, and you and I, and all the disciples of Christ are often counted among the poor... Remember that it is precisely the poor that have the good news preached to them! The Good News of the forgiveness of your sins for Jesus' sake. The Good News of reconciliation between God and man, between God and you. The Good News of everlasting life with God in heaven.

As we celebrate Christ's first coming, and prepare for His final coming... and as you hear and see the gracious things He gives you through humble means, "*blessed is the one who is not offended by Him.*"

Amen.