

The Advent of Joy

Sermon by the Rev. DWHinkle

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Scripture: Matthew 11:2-12

“2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ 4Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.’

7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”

11Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.”

John sits in prison and wonders if Jesus is really the Messiah. He hadn't expected things to turn out this way. His life is now in grave danger. Jesus isn't doing things the way he expected he would. Jesus isn't fielding an army or revving the people up for a revolution. John thought Jesus would be more zealous than himself, but he's not. He appears to be less willing to use violence to bring God's righteousness and peace. John decides to send an emissary to Jesus to get some answers.

John's question is this: *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*” Who are you? A fake or the real deal? It's the question every one of us must answer, and it's the most important question we'll ever consider.

Jesus doesn't answer John directly. Instead he says, *Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”*

Every proof of his being God's chosen One involves compassion and healing, not judgment or condemnation. And the recipients of this healing are

those who ordinarily would be left out. The dead and wounded are all outside the circle of those usually chosen.

John had announced that the coming One would bring fiery judgment, pitchfork in hand and an axe chopping the root of the trees. Jesus demonstrates none of this spirit. He won't even denounce Herod who has John imprisoned. Clearly, Jesus and John are on different pages.

And then there is this strange tag line, *Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*" John took offense at Herod for marrying Herod's brother's wife. He was scandalized by this and spoke out strongly against it. Herod's wife, Herodias, hated him for this and wanted him dead. She and John were in battle. She had the power so John lost his head.

Is Jesus saying to John the Baptist, don't do to me what you did to Herod, that is, don't put yourself over against me? If you don't put yourself into a power struggle with me, you will be blessed. Remain open to me. Don't write me off because I'm not who you think I should be. God may be bigger than you think. God may have plans other than those you can imagine. If you don't understand something, don't dismiss it just because you don't understand it. Maybe your way of understanding is the problem. Remain open to me long enough for me to impact you.

This is a good message for all seekers. Don't be scandalized by the compassion of Jesus that we know leads to his crucifixion. Don't be put off with what appears to be soft and weak. Yes. He shows no wrath or retributive judgment, but, it has a power that will astound you.

As the delegation from John leaves, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about him. These were the same people who had gone out to hear John. Jesus asks them, *What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.*" No, they'd gone out to see a prophet and they saw one and more. He was more than a prophet because he not only looked toward a new age, but he also participated in its coming. John the Baptist was a transition figure. He prepared the way for Jesus by dramatically putting a period at the end of the sentence called the age of the prophets.

This messenger sent ahead of Jesus was a fiery man, bearing a message of *vengeance with terrible recompense*", to use words from our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah. His words make the heart afraid by threatening us with abandonment and exclusion. Though hot, they're also cold and violent words, causing us to pull our cloaks more tightly around us. Like cold winds in winter, they cause us to huddle in our coats.

By contrast, Jesus excludes no one and heals the broken. He absorbs the full weight of our wrath and does not, in any way, retaliate. In fact, where John

envisioned the axe laid to the root of the tree, Jesus becomes the tree cut down by the axe of our violence. Where John pictured the winnowing fork as a tool for separating wheat from chaff, Jesus refuses the winnowing fork and heals the chaff.

John prepares the way for Jesus by standing in such contrast to him that we see Jesus all the more clearly. Jesus is the warm wind of forgiveness and compassion that compels us to loosen our coats of self-protection, shame, and guilt. In the warmth of his love, we open up and accept ourselves as ordinary sinners saved by grace. We accept ourselves as competitive, and jealous, and envious, and often vindictive, all the while knowing that we are forgiven. This very forgiveness moves us away from what we do, so that our hearts are in the slow process of transformation. We don't even need to get into a power struggle with our own worst faults, for Christ's forgiveness and help, stand between us and our addictions.

Jesus said, *Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*" John said the same thing when he declared himself unworthy to carry the coming One's sandals.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, the focus is joy. If we exclude the two verses in the middle of the text from Isaiah, it vibrates with joy. It's the same joy we feel when we experience the contrast between Jesus and John the Baptist.

Isaiah's text promises that, *waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.*" Ancient intuition knew that there would be a great reversal. Something dramatic would spring out of that which appeared dead and useless. The ancients knew that there'd be a breaking forth of something lush and exceedingly abundant where it was least expected. The least expected place in all of creation is certainly the womb of a poor, Jewish woman and the cross, a place of execution, and yet, by God's power, this is precisely the place where the bursting forth happened.

The image of lushness bursting out where it's the driest, now morphs into a highway called *the Holy Way.*" Is this the highway of forgiveness? I think so. The poetic image has gone beyond the comprehension of its writer. While it says, *the unclean shall not travel on this road,*" what if the unclean are those who don't forgive? Maybe it's not a moral or hygienic definition, but a relational one. This highway of forgiveness shall be for all God's people, and you can't go astray, not even fools can go astray. I find great comfort in that.

On this highway of forgiveness, there'll be no predators, no one sustained by destroying another. And the redeemed will be those who've learned how to live without destroying anyone. They'll be like lions who eat straw in God's Peaceable Kingdom. This is a message of great Joy.

Amen?!

Sources:

NRSV Bible

Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Truby and the Rev. Laura C. Truby

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