

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Third Sunday of Advent - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 146:5-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

12/15/2019

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

2When 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 offense at me."

7As 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.”

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Doubt

Good morning! There have been a few points in my life where I felt truly lost and confused. Today’s story is about one of those times. My freshman year of college wasn’t so great. It all started off with a horrible roommate from New Jersey. This guy redefined the word “jerk” for me. So at a time when others were

hitting it off with roommates and making new friends, I felt pushed away. I eventually moved in with another guy, but he had a girlfriend in Pittsburgh that he left to go see every weekend. So, instead of trying to make new friends, I just drove the 5-10 minutes to see my old friends, which only furthered the feeling of isolation. I also spent the entire year single. Now there I was, no love interests, no friends, just my new classes. College was for me the first time I had to put any effort into school, so I was feeling very challenged.

At least I had my faith though, right?! Well, it was during that year that my Younglife leader Dave Etling moved to the Eastern Shore. This was one of the people who convinced me to become a pastor, and now he was gone. This was also a time of learning for me. I was a theology and religious studies major and so I was learning all kinds of fascinating and interesting things about religion and the Bible, and some of it challenged things I had grown up believing.

My life was a period of major changes and huge mental and emotional challenges. “Is this God stuff real?,” I asked. Sitting up late at night on a weekend, staring out at a dark sky, I wondered just how insane it all seemed at that moment. So, what do you do when you’re having an moment of crisis on a Catholic school campus? Well, you go knock on the door of the priest one floor down. I loved Father Steltenkamp, I don’t think I’ll ever meet a priest as crazy as this man. But he answered his door, listened to whatever craziness I said, and invited me to the floor lounge to talk. I can’t remember what was said, because I don’t think words were what I even needed, but at that moment of doubt and uncertainty, I was comforted, assured, and turned in the right direction.

Have you ever felt like that before? Have you ever encountered moments of sometimes sudden and powerful doubt? Well if you have, I’m here to tell you that it’s ok, I have too. I think John the Baptist was there in our text today. It’s a strange pick for

Advent, but I think there is something profound going on in our Gospel reading for today. It can be easy to take a story from the Bible for granted, but stop and think about how strange this story is. We're almost halfway through the Gospel of Matthew and John the Baptist enters back into the story. Now that's not so strange, but the question certainly is, because if you jump back to Matthew chapter 3, we have John proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah. All that proclamation seems to be forgotten. Douglas R. A. Hare writes *"John's question... poses a problem for many readers. Had John so quickly forgotten what he said in 3:14? ... More to the point, ... is the proposal that this question, not 3:15, is authentic. That is, that only now, upon hearing news of Jesus' miracles, does it occur to John that Jesus is the Messiah. Early interpreters suggested that John asked the question only for the sake of his disciples, since he himself knew the answer. Matthew is apparently untroubled by such concerns."*¹ It's as if what Hare

¹ Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 120.

wrote is true, the writer of the Gospel's primary concern is the question.

What I find even more interesting is the way that Jesus answers the question. He doesn't just simply say yes, he doesn't really even answer, he points to what he's doing. It's as if the action is the answer. *"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 offense at me."* It's almost like it's too good to be true for John the Baptist. As he sits in prison, maybe in a dark and depressing place, he starts to wonder, could this all be true? He's heard the rumors, whispered through the prison bars, but he wants to know! He has cared for these people for so long, could it really be time? And just like my talk with Father Steltenkamp all those years ago, it's not the words that really matter, but the actions. A simple answer from Jesus won't do for John, or even ourselves, we want to SEE something. And that's

exactly what Jesus does. To go even further, what Jesus does is concrete! Have you ever seen the comic of the man who's drowning? A few feet away is a man in a boat, who could easily save him, but he's shouting at the man "My thoughts and prayers are with you!" Sometimes words mean nothing, and Jesus knows this, so he's working to actively change the world around him! Healing those that need to be healed, supporting those that need lifted up, oh, and that simple thing of giving life to those who were thought dead.

Like I said earlier, it's a strange story for the season of Advent, but I think we have it because we see some of those same signs all around us. Jesus never stoped working in the world to bring about change, to bring about something new. Just look under the Chrismon tree. We see gifts a plenty for people we've never met. Jesus is at work in our hearts. Or take a look around you, people of faith who have come together at a very busy time of the year because Jesus has changed something inside of us.

Around the world we seem to try a little harder, most of us try to be a little more patient, a little more kind. Why, if not because this season of expectation means something different for us?

Advent reminds me that in some ways, my questions don't matter. I can doubt all I want, but none of that will change God. I can be unsure about everything under the sun, and Jesus will remain true. When we doubt, it doesn't stop God from being God, and it certain doesn't stop Jesus from changing and saving the world.

If you have the type of faith that doesn't doubt, good for you, but most of us aren't like that. So I'm here to tell you that it's ok, even John the Baptist had a few questions. In the midst of our confusion, God just keeps on keepin' on, and if that's not good news, I don't know what is. Amen.