

Sermon Advent III
Isaiah 35:1-10, Psalm 146:4-9, Matthew 11:2-11
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Last week, you will remember, John the Baptist was fresh from the wilderness and full of fire. He was on a roll, chastising the religious elite and anticipating the one who was coming to restore Israel to eternal glory. This One would be so great, in fact, that John wouldn't even be worthy to touch his sandals.

What a difference a few chapters make. This morning John is in prison for publicly criticizing the King. Against Jewish law, Herod had dismissed his wife and married the wife of his brother. John wouldn't let it go unchallenged and was paying the price for trying to make even kings play by the same rules as everyone else.

This passage is interesting in several ways. It shows that John was bold and outspoken, first against the religious leaders and now against the political leaders. John's ministry continued even after Jesus began his ministry, for we hear that John still has disciples. And finally and most importantly, John is questioning whether he was right about Jesus. Had he announced the actual messiah or made a mistake? Was the real messiah yet to come?

What a crisis for John! Initially he had been so sure about Jesus. But apparently the messianic expectations he had anticipated hadn't been realized. He was languishing in the king's dungeon wondering why evil rulers like Herod were still in power. Why hadn't the messiah burned the chaff and ridded Israel of all her opponents and oppressors? Could his ministry have been in vain? Would he be executed knowing he had gotten it all wrong? Confident John had become doubting John.

John wasn't the first or the last to evaluate his life in the light of his possible death. I suspect most people do a bit of a life review as the end nears, and well we should. Not long ago I was visiting with an older parishioner who

knew that his life was drawing to a close. He was visibly and emotionally distraught because he realized and admitted that he had made plenty of mistakes. Unfortunately, he didn't have the opportunity to make everything right or try again. At such a time, confession and absolution can be extremely helpful. The grace of God can be our best friend, if we can accept forgiveness from a merciful God.

Better yet, however, is to repent now long before we get to crunch time. The church seasons of Advent and Lent are for that specific reason – some **self-examination**. “Am I living in a manner acceptable to me, my family, my community and my God? If I were to die tomorrow, would I have lived my life as well as I could have, responsive to God and neighbor? Has my life made any appreciable difference?”

John the Baptist does the only thing available to him as he wrestles with these or similar questions. He sends his disciples directly to the source to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” You've got to love John's directness. He doesn't have time to be less than direct.

Jesus' answer isn't nearly as straightforward. He could have said simply, “Yes, I am the messiah.” But he has to tell John and Matthew's readers that while John did identify the right person in Jesus of Nazareth, he had the wrong understanding of the initial role of God's anointed one.

John and everyone else thought the messiah would change the landscape in Israel by forcibly replacing Roman domination. Furthermore, God's Christ would in short order take the throne and rule the whole world.

In reality, Jesus, since his baptism by John, had been operating much more stealthily. He hadn't yet confronted a single Roman except to heal an officer's son. His ministry was to individuals and most of them of little or no consequence. He was making lots of small **ripples** rather than torrential earth-moving rapids. Jesus quotes portions of Isaiah to prove to John and **us, the readers**, that his ministry is in fact authentic and God **ordained**: “ ...

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.” No one has the power to do those things other than God alone. These are surely signs that a change is taking place. God is throwing off shackles that keep individuals from realizing their full potential as human beings.

God’s work may always be smaller, slower and quieter than we want. The work of Jesus seems to be more focused on changing people from the inside out so that we can together be agents of change in our communities. Christians were responsible for hospitals and schools for people at all levels of society long before they became normative and public institutions. Healing and empowerment have always been **hallmarks** of the Christian witness. How can we remove impediments to help people gain social, economic, religious and political equality and inter-dependence that nearly all of us enjoy? We will always need God and one another for all that.

As the body of Christ, the fellowship of the baptized, disciples of Jesus, our mission is in the words of the Psalmist **“to** give justice to those who are oppressed and food to those who are hungry, to care for the stranger, sustain the widow and orphan, and lift up those who are bowed **down.”**

John the Baptist, we have to assume, died content knowing he had done the Lord’s will and gotten it right after all. He had in fact pronounced the coming of the true messiah even if he misunderstood. **We, too,** can both live and die content by doing our Lord’s will without misunderstanding by continuing as a church to share our bounty and serve the least among us. AMEN.