

“John the Baptist’s *cri de cœur*”
A sermon for Trinity United, Nanaimo, BC
Advent III, 15 December 2019
Mt. 11: 2-11

Good Morning. I’m delighted to be here again at Trinity United, and I much appreciate that Foster included me in today’s service. It’s always an honour. Today we celebrate Advent III, Rejoice Sunday. The canonical readings for today – your bulletin noted them last week – give us a sense of reasons to rejoice. I want to mention something about the 1st reading from Isaiah 35. In it, we learn not only that people hampered by various frailties will be cured, but that Nature itself will be refreshed when the Messiah comes. Not only will the people sing, but Nature will rejoice as deserts blossom and dry riverbeds gush with life-giving water. Powerful, consoling, joyful images. And, if today one chooses to pray vss.46-55 from Luke 1 as the canticle instead of Ps. 146, Mary’s *Magnificat* certainly is a song of rejoicing.

But, this is the liturgical year when we meet John the Baptist on two Advent Sundays. On Advent II – the Gospel is from Matthew 3:1-12 – he’s in the desert proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. And on Rejoice Sunday, today, he’s in prison. Where’s the joy in that?

That’s one worthy question to ask. But I have another as I ponder this Gospel: namely, why does John ask the question he does of Jesus? Given why he’s in prison, he must know that either a slow wasting death or painful execution is his fate; he’s not getting out. Back on Advent I, Foster mentioned the prophet Habakkuk and the “cry of the heart” questions he asks: “How long, oh Lord, shall I cry for help? How long and you will not hear, you will not save?” Habakkuk’s questions spring from his particular and heartfelt place in messianic history and his hopes for God’s response.

With *his* relevant place in messianic history, and from his prison cell, John’s singular *cri de cœur* might sound rather atypical. “Are you the one who is to come, or must we wait for another?” Why does he need to ask this *now*, after the life he’s led? So, I want to spend a bit of time looking at John’s history, the point of his question, and of Jesus’ answer. Then it’s worth discerning what wisdom and challenge comes to us today as we hear and ponder this passage.

Much of what we know of John the Baptist comes to us from the Gospel of Luke, chp. 1, when the newly pregnant Blessed Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth. At Mary’s arrival, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, and immediately asks how it is that she’s being honoured with a visit from “the mother of my Lord.” But what else happens? The baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy. That’s John, and he only needs Mary to cross the threshold of the house for him to sense “divine presence” and rejoice. Both Elizabeth and her unborn child just know – the Spirit has moved them – that Blessed Mary is *Theotokas*, the mother of the Messiah, *their* Messiah for whom all Israel has been waiting. It’s at this point, too, that Mary sings her song of praise, the *Magnificat*: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.”

Then, later in Luke(1:76), after naming his son John, Zechariah – filled with the Spirit – utters a prophecy, the prayer we know as the *Benedictus*. In it Zechariah says,

“And you, child, shall be called prophet of the Most High” – an amazing title – “for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.” That’s why John is often called the precursor of the Lord. After this occasion, we only learn that John grows up “strong in spirit” and lives in the wilderness until the day he appears publicly to Israel.(Lk.1:80)

His public appearance begins in Matthew 3, the Gospel proclaimed on Advent II. In this passage we learn that John begins his ministry in the wilderness. He then moves to the area around the Jordan, preaching a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Anticipating the immediacy of the Messiah’s arrival, he tells people, “Let’s get ready.” Isaiah’s ancient prophecy(40:3) is cited because John *is* indeed that “voice of one crying out . . . to prepare the way of the Lord.” It’s in this passage, as you know, that people wonder if John is the Messiah they await. His response? “One who is more powerful than I is coming,” so great that I’m unworthy to undo his sandal strap. John says he baptizes with water for repentance, but the one who’s coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. So, this is John who’s grown strong in spirit, and seems to be very aware of the person whose arrival he’s proclaiming.

All four Gospels have an account of John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan; in each, we learn that the heavens open, a dove descends, and a voice makes it clearly known that Jesus is God’s beloved Son. In the Gospel of John(1:32), we don’t witness the baptism directly; we hear John the Baptist testifying after the fact, saying that he saw the dove, the Spirit descend and remain on Jesus. He knows his ministry as forerunner of the Lord has brought him to this day, this day of public testimony. So, in all, John clearly has a sense of who he has baptized, the one whose arrival he has spent his public life announcing.

In Matthew’s Gospel, we don’t see John again until chp. 11, today’s passage. And except for an account of this incident occurring in Luke 7, John is pretty absent in the other Gospels, too, until he’s executed.(Mt.14:1-14, Mk.6:17-29, Lk.9:7-9) So today, John’s question put to Jesus by way of John’s followers intrigues me. This is John who knows from the womb that his Messiah has arrived. This is John who, even while in prison, has learned of Jesus’ ministry through his followers and general word of mouth. So to ask *now* if Jesus is the one, or must we wait for another – surely there’s a reason.

I can only assume that John, who has spoken of the Messiah as one more powerful, one whose winnowing fork would separate grain from chaff, the good from the bad – with the bad being “thrown into eternal fire” – that John has expected a warrior-type saviour whose “vengeance and terrible recompense” against the powerful of the day would be more obvious; or he’s hoped at least for an upfront, more vocal pro-activist. Does John perhaps *doubt* Jesus’ identity, *doubt* the reality of Jesus as “Messiah”? However much he learns of Jesus’ ministry, perhaps John *doubts* that Jesus’ seemingly low-key way of dealing with the governing powerful, and with evil in general, perhaps he *doubts* this will achieve much. Jesus is preaching, teaching, and healing, but he’s not routing the foe! John’s likely unaware of the fact that Jesus *is* rocking boats – and John’s dead by the time Jesus’ humble ministry gets him crucified!

So as John languishes in prison, and as I try to get into his head ‘n heart, I can only assume he needs assurance of who Jesus is, plus affirmation that his time hasn’t been ill-spent, perhaps wants validation of his mission. Especially now, if in prison he

has no more time/opportunity to proclaim a “still yet to come” Messiah. So this is his *cri de cœur* and it’s focused and profound; so is his pain because the question springs from the core of John’s being, given what’s he’s known from the womb and which now – at the end of his life – leaves him confused and in doubt about who Jesus is, and whether what he’s been doing really matters. He opts to send a couple of his followers to find/ask Jesus directly.

So, let’s look at Jesus’ answer to John. I’m reminded of poet Emily Dickinson, who once wrote, “Tell the truth, but tell it slant.” That’s what Jesus does here: his answer isn’t a simple “Yes, I am the one.” He advises the Baptist’s followers to tell him what *they’ve* seen ‘n heard – be first-hand witnesses. To what? Essentially to actions that prove the truth of who Jesus is: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dumb speak, and lepers are cleansed. And in this, we hear – as should John – a clear echo of the prophetic Isaian passage that’s today’s 1st reading: the saving actions that will happen when the Messiah comes – amazing, positive changes. John has his answer, and his disciples leave.

We have *no* clue how that answer is received by John. But for the crowds still around Jesus, let’s attend to what they’re told additionally. Jesus asks why these people went to the desert, and confirms they didn’t go looking for royalty, but a prophet. “Yes more than a prophet,” Jesus says. He continues that of all people born of woman, no one is greater than John. This is an amazing compliment; sadly it’s not part of the message that goes back to John! But if John really hears the answer he *does* receive, it should give John consolation ‘n courage, some peace of mind as he lives out his remaining days.

So back to the crowds who are left, people who receive more of what Jesus has to say. That crowd includes us. What does he say next? He offers a huge HOWEVER. Yes, here on earth John is the greatest, BUT in the kingdom of heaven, “the least” are greater than John. Who are “the least”?

In Jesus’ day and society, they were the very ones with whom he spent time: teaching, healing, offering forgiveness and consolation. In quiet ways, giving “these lesser folk” of that day – the poor, the sick, the disenfranchised and despairing – giving them hope *and* strength to be strong in the face of *their* life situations. Jesus’ daily activities among them are proof that God hasn’t defaulted on the promise that Emmanuel would come and be with them, and save them.

So as we in that crowd watch time move forward, “the least” of whom Jesus speaks are the downtrodden in *any* society, in *any* era or place: the people ill-treated by governments, people hampered by the requirements of various systems, shackled by illness, unemployment, homelessness, war, exile from a homeland, or discrimination of any kind. Each of us knows who in our day the “downtrodden” are. So, oddly, that question of John’s – “Are you the one who is to come, or must we wait for another?” – reminds me of the story in Luke 10 about the Good Samaritan. This question can be asked by the beaten man at the roadside, as he waits/hopes someone will come along and offer assistance. As you well know, two of his countrymen *do* see him, and intentionally pass on by. Only a foreigner stops and attends to the man in his distress.

This is where I see the challenge in that question of John's, the challenge to us *today* as we hear that question being asked: of us individually, of our churches, our governments and service agencies by those in real distress of various sorts. I'm reminded of words by 16th century mystic, Teresa of Avila, who wrote: "In our day, Christ has no hands or feet but ours. No eyes or ears, but ours. No voice but ours." And of course we know well from the "final judgment" chapter(25) in Matthew's Gospel – as the sheep and goats are being separated, the righteous are told that insofar as they had engaged in what we know of as the corporal works of mercy, insofar as they engaged in them, ah "to *the least* of these," they had served Christ. So, as we hear and respond to "the least" of *our* day as they ask John's question, may we actively advocate for, and engage in, their well-being. May we see Christ in them and be Christ to them. May it be so, with God's help. Amen.