

Are you the one who is to come?

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. [Amen]

Our text for today is the Gospel according to Matthew in the eleventh chapter:

*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?"*¹

Jesus says in our reading today that John the Baptizer was the greatest man who ever lived. As the Word bears witness, John wasn't a reed shaken by the wind. He wasn't a "yes man" who itched the people's ears with what they wanted to hear. John called the Pharisees snakes and King Herod an adulterer. John wasn't a man who dressed in soft clothing and drew crowds because of his appealing lifestyle. He wore camel's hair, lived alone in the wild, and scavenged for locusts and honey. John himself says that he wasn't even a prophet. This is the testimony of Scripture.

John was more than a prophet. John was greater than faithful Enoch and patient Job... greater than Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and even Moses. But John wasn't the greatest human being who ever lived because of the character of his life or even because of his Divine Call to preach. Yes, John was pious, but that's not why Jesus calls him the greatest born of women. John was the greatest man born of woman because of the content of his preaching. The Old Testament prophets pointed to the Lamb who would one day come, and more than that, John pointed at the Lamb who is come. John, prepared the way for Christ, and so Christ calls him the greatest.

For that reason though, our text today opens with a question we probably wouldn't expect to find on the lips of the greatest man born of woman. While in prison, John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him,

*"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"*²

There's no getting around the fact that this is a difficult saying of Scripture. Many theologians either outright refuse to or are too timid to admit that someone as holy as John, a man who preached with fervor unlike any other, and a man who pointed to Christ with his own finger, could possibly be struck with a moment of doubt having seen, heard, and preached what

¹ Mathew 11:2.

² Matthew 11:3.

he did. After all, Scripture tells us that it was John who saw the heavens open and the Spirit of God descend on Christ at the Jordan River, and it was John who heard the voice from heaven say, *“This is my beloved Son.”*³ So, for many it’s hard to imagine John the Baptizer lacking faith.

But whether or not this particular instance is an example of John doubting, the truth is that even if he is the greatest born of women, John the Baptizer was still born of a woman. He was an heir of his father Adam, and he bears the same scars that all sinners bear. John the Baptizer was conceived in sin, and brought forth in iniquity. And that means that John experienced doubt, too.

So maybe, as some have said, the origin of John’s question is the product of his own preaching. Maybe John was taken back by the fact that the One coming after him Who is mightier than he, with His winnowing fork in hand, was eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors instead of clearing His threshing floor, gathering in the wheat, and burning the chaff. If the axe was already at the root of the tree, well then why was Jesus taking so long to chop it down? If Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, if He is the Dayspring from on High who ushers in the new era of salvation, proclaiming liberty to the captives, then why does John rot in the darkness of a prison cell?

Or maybe, as others have said, John sends his disciples to Jesus because John knew that the Gospel would be a stumbling block to many. Jesus even hints at this when he says in our text,

*“Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.”*⁴

Maybe John recognized the objections of his own disciples and so he sent them to Jesus for their own sake. Maybe in doing so, this was one of the last ways for John to communicate that he must decrease while Christ must increase.

Regardless though, in the end, even if he is the greatest born of women, John is still born of woman. John, like his disciples, was still a man – a man who struggled with sin and doubt and a man who could never stop benefiting from the words of Jesus.

The truth remains for us today that no one except Christ is free from sin. And that means that even for the Christian, even for John the Baptizer, and even for you, belief and unbelief exist simultaneously. To use another example, like it was for the Apostle Peter, it just so happens that fervent confession is often accompanied by fervent denial. Sometimes when life hits us harder

³ Matthew 4:11, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:13.

⁴ Matthew 11:6.

than usual, faith wains. Maybe our first response to sickness is fear instead of trust. Maybe, akin to John, in our loneliness we think that God has abandoned us just like our friends, family, or spouse has. Maybe we're terrified to deal with the temporal consequences of our sins even though God has assured us of His eternal mercy through holy absolution. Or maybe we doubt how the kingdom of God can consist of little children when they can't even speak at their own baptisms.

There are plenty of moments and examples of doubt in the life of every Christian and in your life. And amidst these countless examples there is always one common denominator that unites all of them. Faith and trust are fruits of the Word of God, and sin and unbelief are signs of its absence. This means that all doubt is born from an attack on God's holy Word. The devil tempted Adam and Eve in the garden, Christ in the wilderness, and John in prison all in the same way...in the same way that he tempts you even now. Satan tries to sow the seed of doubt by stealing the Word from your hands and from your hearts.

*The Word is a lamp to our feet and light to our path,*⁵ and that means without it, there is only darkness and doubt.

So, in our Gospel text for today, even if John the Baptizer serves as an example of a Christian doubting, more than that he serves as an example of what Christians should do in the face of doubt. In the midst of despair, in the midst of the darkness of prison, and of certain death, John turned to the one place where true, lasting comfort is found – to the place where doubting hearts thirsting for truth are quenched. John sought a message from Jesus. John turned to the Word.

As one theologian put it, John's request is like that of a wife who knows her husband loves her but wants to hear him say it just one more time. Even while John faces the impending darkness of his own death, still his actions bear fruit in keeping with the truth that *the grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.*⁶

And so, hearing the messengers from John, Jesus doesn't scoff and turn his back on those who doubt. He doesn't rebuke John for such an obvious question. Jesus doesn't turn back John's disciples telling them to figure stuff out on their own and then come back to him. No, Jesus preaches the Word to the preacher himself and says,

⁵ Psalm 119:105.

⁶ Isaiah 40:8.

“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, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”⁷

The Scriptures are very clear that the wages of sin is death. And there is no doubt that John the Baptizer, the fiery preacher of repentance that he was, knew that his coming end at the hands of Herod’s executioner was God’s judgment on a sinner. John had preached the Law well. Yet Christ says to John what he also says to all those who are struggling with sin, doubt, despair or suffering. Yes, the Messiah comes to judge, but he also comes to have mercy.

As prophesied by Isaiah in our Old Testament reading, John’s voice cried judgment in the wilderness and prepared the way of the Lord.

“Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand...”⁸

But now that every valley has been lifted and every mountain has been made low by the Word of God, now that consciences are stricken with the knowledge of their own doubt... Now, and also foretold in the prophesy of Isaiah, Christ’s voice speaks tenderly to Jerusalem,

“Comfort, comfort ye my people, your warfare is ended and your iniquity is pardoned.”⁹

John the Baptizer may have been the greatest man born of women, even so, Jesus reminds us that the one who is least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he. For everyone who partakes of the Lord’s body and blood in faith and everyone who is baptized with water and the Spirit, everyone who lives in the New Creation ushered in by Christ’s own death and resurrection, they get to see, taste, touch, and hear what John only received in part. John decreased and Christ increased as a sign that the Gospel is greater than the Law. In the end, mercy trumps sacrifice and God’s word of forgiveness trumps our fears and doubts.

So today, on this Joy Sunday, the color black, which denotes sin, has been removed from our usual Advent violet giving way to the color rose. This is a reminder to us today that in the midst of this penitential season, even as we hear of God’s faithful people suffering, and even as we ourselves struggle with persistent sin and doubt, even so, Jesus continues to preach good news. He remains forever and always the Christ who is come –

The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.¹⁰ Amen.

⁷ Matthew 11:4-5.

⁸ Matthew 3:2.

⁹ Isaiah 40:1-2.

¹⁰ John 1:29.

And the peace of God which passes all human understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. [Amen].

December 17, 2017

Third Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 40:1-8; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 11:2-11

Vicar Jesse Schlie

Catalina Lutheran Church