



SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 3 (A)

Expectations

[RCL] Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:4-9 or Canticle 15 [or Canticle 3]; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

The Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as “Gaudete” or “Rejoice” Sunday, so called because of the heightened excitement in anticipation for the birth of Christ. But as we listen to the gospel appointed for this day, it may strike us that today is more like a “Blue” Third Sunday of Advent rather than a “Gaudete” Sunday. In the gospel lesson, we find John the Baptist languishing in prison. He heard what the Messiah was doing and he was not happy.

A week ago, the gospel from Matthew 3 told of John the Baptist’s high hopes as he hyped about the Messiah, for whose coming he was to prepare. He explained to the crowd who went to listen to him in the wilderness of Judea: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

It is possible that this expectation of the Messiah emboldened John in his preaching. He was notably fearless in confronting the Pharisees and Sadducees, calling them a “brood of vipers,” and calling out Herod for divorcing his wife and marrying his sister-in-law. It was because of this that Herod had him arrested and put behind bars. But perhaps John did not mind going to prison because he was expecting that once Jesus had settled into his role as the Messiah, he would make everything right. He would make quick work of their Roman enemies and rescue him from prison.

But after many months of waiting in prison, it has become evident that Jesus did not live up to all the hype that John heaped upon him. When he heard what Jesus had been doing: healing the sick, casting out demons and teaching people that the meek and the persecuted are blessed, telling them to turn the other cheek and to love not just neighbors but enemies, he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask if he is the one who is to come, or should they look for another. It has become disappointingly clear that John’s expectation of Jesus did not pan out.

Like John, we have expectations of God and have experienced being disappointed by God - some of us more regularly than others. Many of us believe God to be invincible and powerful and expect that God

would use his divine powers to heal the sick, solve world hunger, wipe out injustice and racism, stop all wars and reward our faithfulness with material and spiritual blessings. Like John the Baptist, we wish Jesus, our savior, would not act like us finite, ordinary humans, but rather be more like Captain America or Supergirl or any of the many Marvel heroes and heroines.

But Jesus is not this kind of savior. He did not come with military might or wealth. His way of saving the world is through soft power – sacrificial and loving service. It is no wonder that when one looks at the religious landscape, at conservative, liberal, progressive, religious right, or *via media* Christians, John's question seemed to have become the reality as people reject the Jesus of the gospels and look for another version of the Messiah that fits their lifestyle and ideology.

This Advent, as we get ready to welcome Christ anew, we are given another opportunity to get it right. For although Jesus did not give an easy and clear answer to John, he gives him some concrete hints about what he's up to: "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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

These words of Jesus recall the words of the prophet Isaiah in today's lectionary. These words describe what will happen when the Messiah comes. It was not a popular image associated with most of the Jews' expectation of the Messiah at that time and yet there it is, hidden in plain sight.

In other words, Jesus tells John that the work of God is not bombastic or earth-shattering as John and many of us imagine it to be. John expected that Jesus would come with an ax to cut down the trees that are not bearing fruit, separate the wheat and store it in the barn and burn the chaff. Instead of this, Jesus tells him to break free from his narrow expectation that has figuratively imprisoned him, to see beyond the destructive and angry God that he expected the Messiah to be, and open up to the God who heals, who teaches to transform people, who desires not the death of sinners but that all might repent, who shows love, mercy, and compassion. In short, the gospel invites us to open our eyes and our ears to the handprints of God in the hidden, nontraditional, and unpopular, amid our anguish, disappointments, and doubts.

Then, perhaps, when we begin to see God in these "hidden" places, we can be a sign to the world that what Jesus said is true. We can be Jesus' answer to John's question. We can be the blind whose eyes were opened, the lame whose legs can walk again, the lepers who have been cleansed, the deaf whose ears have started hearing, the dead who have been raised, and the poor who have received good news.

The gospel does not tell us whether John eventually understood, accepted, and set aside his assumptions of Jesus. What we know is that Jesus welcomed his questions and his doubts and praised John as "more than a prophet" in front of the crowds. This tells us that we should not be ashamed or afraid to voice our questions, name our doubts, and share our stories of disappointments. Often, we do not raise questions because we are embarrassed that people might think of us as ignorant, and we do not share our doubts

because we are afraid people will think we are weak. But the way we move past our ignorance is by raising questions; we rewire our brains when we doubt and open ourselves to other possibilities, and we remove the sting of our disappointments by naming them. It is when we share our stories of darkness that we begin our journey toward the light.

The story of John ended tragically when he was beheaded by the order of Herod in Matthew 14. The price of preaching the gospel is that people receive the Good News and are healed and made whole. The other side is that others who enjoy the oppressive status quo will be offended. And so, just like many of the prophets before him, John died, standing up for the truth and serving as light in the darkness. We wish that Jesus would have done more than praise John and would have rescued him from prison. But the gospel is not a fairytale with a happy ending. The gospel is a kaleidoscope of joy, pain, hope, suffering, peace, fear, triumph, surrender, faith, doubt, disappointments, meaning, loss, and fulfillment. Using rhetorical questions, Jesus shakes up the crowd as he tells them to look for God – not among those who are dressed in fine robes or live in royal palaces – but rather among the least and vulnerable, among God’s prophets, like John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, and Zechariah. Amen.

*This sermon was written by **the Ven. Irene Egmalis-Maliaman**, of the Episcopal Church of St. John the Divine in Tamuning, Guam.*