

Third Sunday in Advent; December 11, 2022

+ Matthew 11:2-10 +

“Rejoice in Jesus”

**While John was in prison, he heard about the things Christ was doing. He sent two of his disciples to ask him, “Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else?”**

**Jesus answered them, “Go, report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor. Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me.”**

**As these two were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the crowds about John. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothing? No, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you! And he is much more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘Look I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’”**

John the Baptist tells the truth. He’s a total truth teller. He is also brave. So he keeps telling the truth, even when it’s going to get him trouble.

When John’s ruler, Herod, illegally marries his own sister-in-law, John does what he does. He tells the truth, even though he will get in trouble for it. In the end, telling Herod the truth will cost John his life. But before that happens, John spends time behind bars. **While John was in prison, he heard about the things Christ was doing. He sent two of his disciples to ask him, “Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else?”**

There is no agreement on why John sends these messengers to Jesus. Some believe John is only sending them for their benefit, so that they will listen to Jesus and then transition to following Jesus instead of John. I don’t think that’s the case. I agree with those who think John is asking this question for his own benefit. I think that’s the better way to understand it, because the words do not say that John asks the question for his disciples. Besides that, when Jesus answers the question he says, **“Go, report to John...”**

So it’s very likely that John the Baptist himself is wondering whether Jesus is really **the Coming One**, the promised Messiah. Why does John the Baptist ask such a question? Why does he doubt who Jesus is? Consider what Jesus says about John later, while John’s followers are still in earshot: **As these two were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the crowds about John. “What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?”** John the Baptist is not weak. He doesn’t bend and shake and quake in the wind like a reed. He is not a man who will easily allow doubts about Jesus to enter his heart. Jesus continues questioning the crowd: **“What did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? No, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses.”** John the Baptist is also not a shill for people in power. He doesn’t come from a palace, live in palace, or say what rulers want him to say. If he did, Herod would not have locked him up!

So who is this John, who is now questioning whether Jesus really is the Messiah? **“So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you! And he is much more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’”**

John the Baptist is a prophet of God! And, as Jesus says, **more than a prophet**. John is the New Testament prophet that the Old Testament prophesied! He is the prophet with the special privilege of arriving just

before the Savior, pointing to him, and saying, **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”** Later in this chapter Jesus even says, **“Among those born of women there has not appeared anyone greater than John the Baptist.”**

John the Baptist is not a waffler or a sell-out to kings. He’s a prophet. A great prophet. The prophet who points in person to Jesus and says, “He’s the One!”

And now this great prophet asks Jesus, through two of his disciples, **“Are you the Coming One or should we expect someone else?”** So the indomitable unshakable great prophet wonders who Jesus is. He doubts. Because he is strong; he is principled; he is godly; he is great. And he is also human. John the Baptist is sinful like you and me. Even he has his doubts about Jesus.

And, on a certain level, that should comfort us all. This is not to say that doubts about who Jesus is are a good thing. They are not. But we should not write ourselves off as faithless rejectors of Jesus because sinful doubts about him sometimes rise up. We are sinful humans, too, like John the Baptist. All sinners doubt Jesus at least once in a while.

But why, specifically, is John doubting Jesus? Is it because John is in prison? Because he’s in trouble for speaking the truth? It doesn’t seem so. That doesn’t seem to be the reason, if you look closely at how Jesus answers John’s question.

Consider the message John had preached to prepare the way for Jesus. This is John the Baptist preaching in chapter three of Matthew’s Gospel: **“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, [John] said to them, ‘You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! Do not think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’”**

Do you see where John’s doubts are coming from? He prophesied judgment to Jesus’ enemies. “Repent – or else! The ax is ready to strike! You have Abraham as your father?! That won’t save you! Repent – or else!” But now where is this judgment? Where is the destruction of Jesus’ enemies? Instead of striking down his enemies, Jesus is traveling through Galilee healing the blind and deaf, lifting up people who cannot walk, raising people who are dead, curing disease! Where is the promised judgment of Jesus’ enemies that John preached?

Doubts are never good. But can we understand where John’s come from? He prophesied destruction for Jesus’ enemies. But instead of destroying, Jesus is forgiving and healing and filling and raising.

Doubts about Jesus are not good. But John does the right thing with his doubt. He takes it to Jesus for an answer. Doubts unanswered will fester into outright unbelief. Jesus is the one to answer them. John is a truth teller, even when it gets him trouble. But Jesus, the Son of God, is the greatest truth teller of all. He never lies. So John takes his doubt to Jesus. And Jesus answers John: **“Go, report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor.”** Does that sound familiar? It should! Compare it to what Isaiah promised the Messiah would do:

**Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unplugged.  
The crippled will leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy.**

So, the work of the Messiah is not just to strike his enemies with judgment. It is also to forgive, to heal, to soothe, and to raise. This joyful work is also the Messiah's mission. Jesus' final words to John's messengers ask John to believe that he is the Messiah who comes not only to judge, but also to forgive, heal, and save: **"Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me."** Believe that I am the Messiah, the one who comes to judge his enemies, but also to bring joy and salvation.

And that is exactly who Jesus is. He does come to judge his enemies. John the Baptist is exactly right about that. And Isaiah, just before he prophesied the joy of healing and salvation wrote: **Look! Your God will come with vengeance. With God's own retribution, he will come and save you.**

We know that Jesus promises judgment on his enemies. Do we ever wonder, like John Baptist, where in the world this judgment this is? Do we ever hear Jesus' enemies mocking him and think, "How long will they get away with this?" John the Baptist was not soft; he was not a shill. And even he wondered this. When we look around at all the evil in our world, we may wonder the same: Just where is this promised judgment? And doubts come to us, too, even Christians whose faith is not weak or soft.

Let's take our doubt to Jesus and let him answer it. He is the ultimate truth teller, and he will answer our doubt before it grows into unbelief.

The message of his judgment against his enemies is not wrong; he speaks that message, too, and his judgment will come. But Jesus is about more than judgment against his enemies. He is also joy for those trust in him.

Listen carefully, now: Jesus comes to forgive, to heal, to raise up. And let that fill you with joy! Because evil is not just around us, and it's not just in Jesus' enemies. It's in us, too. It causes us to sin and to doubt Jesus. And Jesus answers: Rejoice! You are also the deaf whose ears I have opened to God's truth. You are also the paralyzed who could not come to God, but I moved you to believe. You were dead in your soul, and I brought you to faith and brought you to life.

Jesus announced to John's disciples that his work is joyful, too, because it helps and saves those who need it. We need his work, because even if we can physically see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and walk with our legs, we are born spiritually blind, deaf, and dead. And for us Jesus works the joyful miracle of opening our ears and eyes to the truth, and raising us to the life of faith in him.

We are the poor to whom the gospel – the good news of Christ – has been preached. We have heard of his holy life free from all doubt and all sin. We have heard of his death to take our sins away. God's Word preaches his Easter victory to us. And we are rich. We are rich in the good news of our Savior.

The running theme through the last season of the Church Year, which we just completed, and this first season of Advent, is that Jesus coming. And there is a lot of focus on his coming to judge and destroy his enemies. That will happen, when God says the time is right. In the meantime, do not doubt that it will happen. Instead, rejoice. Rejoice in the good news of Jesus. That's what this Sunday is all about.

When we look around our world and wonder like John: Just where is his judgment? Is he really the One? May we do what John does and take our doubt to Jesus. And let's listen to his answer. He does bring judgment. It will come. But he brings salvation, too. And that is joy for all who believe. He comes to save, too. Jesus, fill us with joy in your salvation. Amen.