

Advent 3 - Matthew 11:2-10

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Matthew 11:2-10

²While John was in prison, he heard about the things Christ was doing. He sent two of his disciples ³to ask him, "Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else?"

⁴Jesus answered them, "Go, report to John what you hear and see: ⁵The 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. ⁶Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me."

⁷As 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? ⁸What did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? No, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you! And he is much more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, 'Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

Christ's 3rd Advent: His Coming in Our Hearts

Christmas is eight days away. It's next Monday. You've probably already been asked by someone, maybe even on your way into church today, "Are you ready?" Maybe you've asked someone else, "Are you prepared for Christmas?" What do we mean by that? We don't really mean *Christmas* - we mean "do you have all your presents bought, the food prepared, the cookies baked, the program verses memorized," none of which really *is* Christmas. Because Christmas was an event; a real historical event, that took place about 2017 years ago.

And it's pretty hard to prepare for an event that happened in the past. Actually, it's impossible. Advent *is* all about preparing the way, but preparing the way for not for Jesus' 1st Advent at Christmas - because it happened in the past - but for Jesus' 2nd Advent, the Day when He will come in glory to judge the living and the dead.

But because this 3rd Sunday of Advent is the second Sunday before Christmas, we have a real danger that from here on out, our preparation turns into working ourselves into an emotional frenzy, into a sentimental state about some poor baby born in a stable on a cold and snowy night. Letting our feelings prepare us, rather than God's Word.

Sometimes we need to be reminded that Christmas means more than gushing over a touching story and singing our favorite songs. We need to have the voice in the wilderness cry out to us. We need to make straight in the desert of our hearts a highway for our God.

Why does it matter? Why does it matter that we prepare with objective means and not let our feelings get the best of us?

Because bad things will happen to us in this life. And those terrible things will either cause us to turn inward, or outward to Christ. And when Jesus comes again, if we're turned inward and not looking at Him, we won't be ready. But if in faith we do look to Jesus, when He comes again, we'll be able to lift up our heads and rejoice!

Let's take our text as our example. John the Baptist is in prison. And John has a question we wouldn't expect from him. He sends his disciples to go to Jesus (because he can't go since he's in prison) to ask "Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else?" In other words, "Jesus, are you actually the Messiah? Or are we wasting our time?"

Remember this is John the Baptist, the same guy Matthew in the beginning of his Gospel said this:

In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!" Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

A voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
"Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight."

John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

John, by all accounts, was a real tough guy. Dressed in camel's hair, leather belt, he ate insects for food, lived in the desert, and preached about the apocalypse: "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!"

And John asks, "Jesus, are you actually the Messiah?"

John was no "reed shaken by the wind" nor a weak "man dressed in soft clothing." John was tough, he was the one prophesied by Malachi to "prepare the way" before Christ. And yet John is doubting.

John is a real human being. He suffered, doubted, and sinned, just like you and I do, even though he was extraordinary, even though Malachi and Isaiah prophesied about him, even though his birth also was foretold by the angel to his father Zechariah, and even though there has been no one greater among men than John the Baptist. John still was a sinner.

The Bible relates the story of real people. Of our people - this isn't a comic book - this tells the story of real people with real problems.

John is in prison, he's wearing rags, he's cold, he's lonely, he's hungry, he's waiting to be executed, and so he's doubting whether or not Jesus is actually the Messiah. He's struggling with the thought that maybe God abandoned him, or maybe God's not real after all. Did John's father Zechariah make this all up to him when he was little? Is this whole thing a sham?

Or maybe it's John's own fault. Did he prepare the way for the wrong Messiah? After all, this Jesus seems quite different than the one whom He was supposed to prepare the way for. John preached "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near!" (Matt. 3:2) John knew that he was the chosen messenger in Malachi 3, and he knew that the Messiah coming was a serious and dreadful thing: "Who can endure the day when he comes? Who will remain standing when he appears?" This Messiah is going to purify the world; He'll be like a "refiners fire," He'll throw those who don't repent into the everlasting fire or furnace.

But Jesus doesn't seem to be doing any of that. He's kind and generous - He's even kind and generous to the enemies! And John - the messenger - was about to be killed!

So John, no reed shaken by the wind nor weak man dressed in soft clothing, because he's a sinner and not perfect, doubts.

Consider this: You and I are dressed in soft clothing. We have indoor heating and plumbing. We have plenty to eat, we don't need insects. We have lots of luxuries. We even have a cookie exchange today! And yet, you and I still doubt. We fear that God isn't real, we fear the Bible isn't true, we fear the world is somehow going to take the feeling of Christmas away from us. We misplace our faith. We feel as if God abandons us.

And that's why Christ's 3rd Coming - his advent in His Word and Sacraments - is so important for us, because through these, Christ never stops coming to us. We see that revealed here, in Scripture.

God had not abandoned John the Baptist in prison, even though to John it felt like He had. God certainly will not abandon you either. You are baptized which means you belong to Him, just as John did! God remembers His promises even when you forget them. He remembers His promises even when you are doubting or confused.

If you are doubting or confused, do you know what you should do? Listen to the example of John the Baptist. Go to the Word of God: Read, hear, and study the Word of God. John sent his messengers to the Word of God because he couldn't go himself. He asks Jesus to send His Word to him. He asks Jesus if He is the Coming One. That's like a question a child would ask his mother: 'mom, do you love me?' The child knows the answer, but he needs his mom to reassure him. So does John.

John knows the answer, he knows Jesus *is* the Coming One because he has faith. There's no question John has faith, the question is, does John also have *doubt*?

Yes. Doubt caused John to fear. Doubt caused John to look inward and let his emotions rule him - working himself into an emotional frenzy as he was literally preparing the way for Christmas, the Messiah's 1st Coming.

But faith doesn't look in, faith looks out. And in faith, John did what you and I need to do when we doubt: go to Jesus. And since neither John, nor you and I can physically do that, we need Jesus' Word to be brought to us.

So John sent his disciples to bring the Word of Jesus back to him, to preach to him. Even the best prophets need pastors, pastors to bring the word of God to doubting sinners.

Because it's only the Word of Jesus, the Word of God, that can strengthen, comfort, reassure, and encourage. John wants to hear the Word of Jesus reassuring him that He *is* the coming one. And that's what Jesus does. Jesus doesn't rebuke John for doubting, because on this side of heaven, faith and doubt coexist in the Christian.

Rather, in mercy, Jesus answers John with Scripture. Jesus uses Scripture to answer and reassure John. Jesus could have said just about anything, but Jesus quotes from Isaiah (from numerous places in Isaiah) to show John that there's more to the Messiah than fire and brimstone. One of those places in Isaiah (35:4-6) even starts, "Say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear...behold your God will come...and save you...the eyes of the blind shall be opened...the lame leap...'"

Jesus proclaims the Gospel to even John. Even tough-guy, dressed in camel's hair, locust-eating, apocalyptic fire and brimstone preaching John needed to hear the Gospel. And so do you and so do I.

Because it's only the Gospel than can truly prepare our hearts for Jesus' 2nd Coming. Working yourself up into an emotional frenzy at Christmas over the gifts, the cute baby in a manger, and the holiday spirit won't do a thing to prepare you.

But the Gospel will. The Gospel, preached to you by your pastor, hidden for you in Baptism, and in/with/and under the Bread and the Wine in the Lord's Supper, administered by "stewards of the mysteries of God" to you, shows you that when Christ comes again for you, "He will bring light to...darkness." He will remove your fears and your doubts and come for with His salvation. "Then there will be praise for each from God" (1 Cor. 4:5). We won't fear. We won't doubt. The only response we will have is to "rejoice."

Gaudete! Rejoice! The Lord is near! Amen.