

Sorry, Not Yet
Matthew 11:2-11
Third Sunday of Advent
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 West Union, IA
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Gospel Reading

This is the third Sunday of Advent, and all I have been talking about for the past two weeks, is how this is the time each year when we prepare and anticipate the coming of Jesus Christ; either as a child or as the glory of God coming in the clouds.

Last week, we heard from John the Baptist, crying in the wilderness. The sure and certain voice of God's prophet proclaiming God's truth to the world, that one was coming; that the Lord was coming, and we must prepare and make straight his path.

This week, we jump ahead in Matthew's gospel story, to chapter 11. John is again part of the story, but we hear also from Jesus, the Messiah, whom John proclaimed. The One who would come after him. The One with winnowing fork in hand, who would come to separate the chaff from the grain. The One who would bring the judgement of God.

Now, John is in prison, and Jesus has begun his ministry. Listen now to our gospel reading from Matthew, chapter 11, verses 2 through 11:

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

⁴ Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?"

⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.

⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

It happens nearly every Advent. Something that worship planners and leaders struggle with, people in worship get a little anxious about, and preachers must resist if they are to remain true to the season of Advent. This year, it came as two polite notes in my office mailbox; saying almost the same thing:

“Could we please sing some traditional Christmas hymns? Thanks.”

Unfortunately, the answer is simply: “Sorry, Not Yet.”

A longer answer of course is that Christmas has not yet come, it is, after all, still Advent. Please understand, that I am not trying to embarrass the ones who sent the notes. There weren't signed. But, of course, any pastor worth their stole knows their flock. But more importantly, the sentiment is shared by other members of the congregation. And, I don't want to appear to dismiss that sentiment either. I get it.

Christmas light displays are glowing in every town. Houses and trees are lit. Shopping, if it is not yet done, is beginning to get frantic. Holiday and Christmas parades, television, stores, shop windows, children's programs, Christmas cards and sweaters; everything around us is shouting “It's Christmas Time!”

But...Here in the church, we are still waiting. We are still preparing and anticipating. The problem of course is that we are waiting, preparing for, and anticipating something that already happened, and for something that we do not know when it will happen again: the coming of the Messiah!

In the *Feasting on the Word* lectionary commentary, John P. Burgess, Professor of Systematic Theology, at Pittsburg Theological Seminary, has this to say about the Season of Advent:

The church over the centuries has come to understand that Christians need to set aside regular times of the year to consider again the full significance of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The meaning and joy of Christmas will easily elude us unless we make a focused effort to dwell ahead of time on all the promises of God that have come to fulfillment in Jesus' birth.

Burgess goes on to say that, “the church's traditional Advent practice stands in tension with contemporary culture.” If we give in to that tension, if we shortcut the season of Advent, we run the risk of losing the full impact of what God has done, is doing, and promises to do in the future. So, I hope, you see why it is that we need to linger, a little longer, in Advent; before we move on to Christmas, and everything that that entails.

Today, our reading from Matthew forces us to think about who Jesus, who the Messiah, really is. John sends word from prison. He sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

In Matthew, we only get a hint that John recognized Jesus as the Messiah. When Jesus came to be baptized, John at first refused saying: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John does not actually say that Jesus is the One who will follow him. But now, sometime later, when John is in prison, John sends his disciples to Jesus asking: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

John, the prophet of God who cried out in the wilderness, seems to have doubts about Jesus being the Messiah. John, now in prison, might not be so sure. We are told that John asks his question after he had heard of what Jesus was doing. John had somehow heard, what Jesus had been up to; what Jesus had been doing since his baptism. In Matthew's gospel story when Jesus returned from being tempted in the wilderness, John had been arrested and Jesus went to Galilee and began proclaiming "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." If that sounds familiar it is, word for word, part of what John was proclaiming in our reading from last week.

Then, Jesus begins a tour of Galilee, calling disciples, teaching about the kingdom, and performing miracles: healing diseases, casting out demons, restoring sight, even bringing a girl back from the dead. But, "When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'"

If we think back to last week, back to what John was proclaiming, we can maybe understand his question. John railed at the people to repent because the One who would follow him, was coming with "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." John's message was, you better repent now, because God's wrath was about to rain down on earth, and only the ones who bore the good fruit of repentance would be saved from the unquenchable fire.

But when John heard what Jesus was doing, he sent his disciples to ask: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

If Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, when would the coming judgment begin? When could John expect the winnowing of God's people to begin? John was confused because Jesus was not the Messiah that he was expecting.

On this third Sunday of Advent, as we anticipate the coming of the Son of God, we should consider what kind of Messiah do we expect? Are we, like the people of Israel, looking for the coming of a king? The mighty king in the line of David, who would return in power to rule the world. Or are we, like John, looking for the coming day of judgment? A time when God will separate the sheep from the goats, the weeds from the wheat, the sinners from the righteous. Or, are we looking for Jesus who told John's disciples: "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."

We know the Messiah who came. We know Jesus Christ who came to the earth, who walked among God's people, taught them about the kingdom of God, healed the sick, cured the lame, brought comfort to the afflicted, and freedom to the oppressed. We know the Son of God who offered forgiveness for sins, and died on the cross to save us all. We know the resurrected Christ who sits on the throne of God and reigns over heaven and earth. And we know that that Jesus will return, on an unknown day, and bring judgement, the merciful judgment of a loving God, to God's people.

Earlier I quoted John Burgess who said that Advent was a time of the year, "...to consider again the full significance of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ." And on this third Sunday, our reading from Matthew chapter 11, reminds us that we must consider and remember all of the things that Jesus was and is. We must consider and prepare for all the ways that God comes to God's people, and all of the ways that we are called to be God's people, and imitate the One who came to us, and follow the teaching of God's beloved Son. For only when we embrace all of these things can we appreciate the full meaning and joy of Christmas. We must spend this time in Advent before we move on to Christmas. Before we hear the stories, before we sing the carols, and before we celebrate the birth of God's Son, our Savior Jesus Christ.

Let us pray:

God of prophets and promises, as we linger in Advent, be with us. As we continue to prepare and anticipate your Son, strengthen our resolve to pull against the tension of our society, the desire and temptation to move ahead. As we dwell in this time, clarify in our hearts the knowledge of your Son. Show us the compassionate one who cares for your people, the king who came to reign over your people, and the merciful one who forgives our sin and will judge us all. AMEN.