

Lectionary A December 11, 2016 Third Sunday in Advent
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church Evansville, Indiana
Pastor Roberta Meyer

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalms 146

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Are You the One?

I get it. There have been numerous times that my gut tells me I'm on the right track, but it feels scary and well, it just doesn't look right. I doubt sometimes as a mother, or a teacher, or a wife, or a pastor. I need reassurance. That is where John the Baptist is in our Gospel text. *"When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples³ and said to [Jesus], "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"*

Do you hear him grasping onto hope along with the "don't- get- your- hopes- up- to- high" tone in his questions? John, the one who was sent to "prepare the highway for the Messiah," is in prison, for crying out loud. No one told him this part of the story. He knew there would be some rough patches. Plowing up highways in the wilderness isn't easy. But what if he was wrong? What if this was all just a figment of his imagination? Was he running the risk of literally losing his head for some illusion in his mind—or was it really true?

All his life his parents told him about his birth, how miraculous it was. His parents were old—too old to have a baby. Yet, the angel, Gabriel, visited his father while he was serving in the temple, *"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.¹⁷ With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

This was his truth. It was the heritage that formed him and strengthened him all his life.

But now—sitting in this dark prison cell—what if he was wrong? Doubt was creeping in. Why wouldn't it?

The most important part of this story is Jesus' response to John's question. There was absolutely no scolding in Jesus' tone of voice. Jesus sent John's friends back to him saying, *"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."* Jesus is echoing Isaiah, using familiar words that John was taught as a young boy, to reassure him that he was on the right track. *"⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."*

“All this is true John. No matter what happens, you obeyed God. The highway you prepared is working.” And Jesus turns to the crowd that was there, just in case any of them had doubts about John. Here are his words from the Message Bible. “Jesus *started talking to the crowd about John. “What did you expect when you went out to see him in the wild? A weekend camper? Hardly. What then? A sheik in silk pajamas? Not in the wilderness, not by a long shot. What then? A prophet? That’s right, a prophet! Probably the best prophet you’ll ever hear. He is the prophet that Malachi announced when he wrote, ‘I’m sending my prophet ahead of you, to make the road smooth for you.’”*

Making the road smooth is nice for the one following, but for the one plowing this smooth road it is hard work. John, was tired and dismayed. All he could see was the rough terrain ahead of him. He couldn’t see the smooth path he was leaving for others—not from prison.

This story is for us. This time of year, especially, when everything is filled with the manufactured merriment of the season, our struggles and the hard stuff of life make us feel inadequate. On this Sunday when we light the candle of joy, and many of us, if we are honest with ourselves are whispering, “Yal, right.” On this Sunday of Joy, Jesus comes into John’s story of inadequate feelings to tell us that happiness and joy are not the same thing and that doubt is not the opposite of faith. We are on the right track. It is all right to not be happy. It is all right when we doubt.

Look through the Bible, it is filled with stories of men and women who experience feelings of inadequacy and failure, only to see God strengthen them and help them. This is true especially in Jesus’ life. One commentator explains, “*God in Jesus came not as the victorious conqueror that many then – and perhaps some now – wished he would. Rather, Jesus, Matthew confesses, came and comes as Emmanuel, God with us, the one who does not eliminate all our troubles but accompanies us through them; the one who holds onto us when the world feels like it’s falling apart; the one who enters into our suffering and struggle and so reminds us that we are not alone; and the one who promises to bring us through all things even and ultimately through death to new life.*” (David Lose)

If we look at the beginning of John’s Gospel we see that John does not say that Jesus, the light of the world, destroys the darkness but instead keeps shining in the middle of it, and the darkness cannot “overcome” it. This is the source of joy for us today. And it goes hand in hand with everything we are plowing through. Whether it be illness, grief, financial hardship, addiction, oppression, fear of what is going on in our world. Whatever our darkness looks like, our joy is in the promise of Emmanuel, God with us, in whatever prison we find ourselves in life.

I like to watch all these sappy Christmas movies that are on the TV right now. One day a friend who is going through a rough patch came over in the middle of one of these movies. She sat down, not to disturb me at the climax. When it was over she said, “I don’t like these movies. They are all about love and happy endings. I don’t see any happy endings in my life.” She is in a dark place. I’ve been there, too. My job with her right now is to give her love. Not to disregard her darkness, but to help her find a flicker of light that shines through. And right now that flicker is just to honor her sadness and hold her hand so she knows she is not alone. My prayer is that through me she may start to see that God is not only with her right now, but that God is holding her hand and walking with her through this dark, rough road she is on.

John's question isn't just a question, it is a plea for assurance. *"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"*

And Jesus' answer for John to look at what was happening, to look at what he was doing, isn't just an answer but a call to action, to all of us. It is a call that both reminds us of God's promises of healing and peace and empowers us to work for them while we are waiting in this time between the first Christmas and when Jesus comes again.

The Native Americans have a tradition of looking at everything in life and saying, "Thank you." Honoring that even the storms bring new life. What if in our times of doubt, we reach out for God's hand in the dark and just say, "Thank you, God?" Will that make our struggles any less dark? No, but it does remind us of God's light which will overcome that darkness.

This is the reason every one of us today can leave here feeling that promised joy. As children of the light, nurtured at the Lord's Table, we are strengthened and empowered by the body and blood of Jesus, to bring God's light into the world singing, "Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to you O Israel."