

Advent 3A, December 11, 2016

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

I guess most of us have been in circumstances when we really wanted to ask a question for clarification and it seems like everyone else knows the answer, and then someone actually asks the question. And even better, it is the know it all that actually asks the question.

So, thankfully John asks Jesus our question; "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" and if John needs to ask this question from Jesus, how much more do we need to ask this question sometimes?

Last week John was proclaiming the Messiah with confidence and passion; crying out in the wilderness that we must make straight the path for the Lord. And this week he is in prison. Isn't it amazing how our context can shape the way we think and look at things? How it can change perspective?

John is now in a different wilderness than last week; he is in jail; he is no longer baptizing in the Jordan River and he is not prophesying, but is questioning.

And can we blame him?

He is imprisoned for being honest with Herod, not being afraid to speak the truth. And now he is in prison and in mortal danger and wondering if he did the right thing in betting his life on the promise of the Messiah.

This Messiah has not done anything that was expected of him. He was supposed to make all things new and to bring justice and peace and sort out

the abusers of people and power, and most of all good people like John would not and should not be in jail anymore. Jesus was supposed to bring to fullness what was started by the prophets.

But nothing at all has worked out as John thought it would, and all he has left is an anguished question for the pretend Messiah; are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

And this is not just any John were talking about, this is John the Baptist who leapt in his mother's womb when he heard Mary's voice; whose acquaintance with Jesus began at that early age. This is John who baptized Jesus and saw the heavens open up and the Spirit of God descend like a dove on the newly baptized Jesus.

We as Christians often talk about our conversion as a movement from darkness to light, or heartache to joy or whatever imagery we use, but for John it is a reverse situation; he moves from knowing to not knowing, from absolute certainty to doubt. I can hear self-righteous muttering from my teenage schoolyears about backsliding into hell!

For me there is some comfort when we look at John. The same as with Thomas, who allowed himself to doubt. If this could happen to John, how much more not to us?

Isaiah says;

“He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy....”

If John has his moment of doubt and fails to see this promise as set out in Isaiah, because he is in prison, what is holding us captive to prevent us from

seeing this promise? And here is the hopeful thing, again the same as with Thomas, Jesus doesn't condemn John for doubting and asking, no, he responds with complete lack of judgement.

What Jesus tells the men John has sent is to tell John what they hear and see. Jesus **is** doing exactly what he is meant to be doing; "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 once again, even though not stated in the passage, I can imagine Jesus beginning his response to John with: "Do not be afraid." There is no condemnation of John's question.

And yet, John's question; "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" is the question that puts us right in the heart of Advent. It allows us to wonder and ask questions. This is the question that we ask from our own places of insecurity and doubt. It allows us and pulls us into a longing for the hope that comes with the Messiah; the promise of what is, and is to be.

And like John the Baptist, we have to keep on asking this question, particularly when it seems as if life as it is may overwhelm us. However, as Isaiah promises, even if we grow faint, God never will:

'And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.'

Amen