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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, December 11, 2022
3rd Sunday of Advent/Year A
First Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10
Second Reading: James 5:7-10
Gospel Reading: Matthew 11:2-11
Sermon Title: “*Hope Is On The Way*”

Theme

A note of joyful expectation marks today’s worship. Isaiah announces that the desert shall rejoice and blossom, and Jesus points to the unexpected and transforming signs of God’s reign. We wait with patience for the coming of the Lord, even as we rejoice at his presence among us this day: in word and holy supper, in church and in our homes, in silent reflection and in works of justice and love. We pray that God would open our eyes and ears to the wonders of Christ’s advent among us.

Texts:

First Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10

¹The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.

³Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.”

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.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
⁷the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

⁹No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.

¹⁰And 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.

Second Reading: James 5:7-10

⁷Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the 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. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

⁷As 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? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

¹¹Truly 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."

Sermon

If you recall, last week's Gospel Reading focused on the ministry of John the Baptist. Jesus wasn't even mentioned specifically. John, as you know, was an eccentric prophet in the style of the great prophets of Israel. His exterior was rough and crude and his demeanor and the way he embraced his mission could be described as extremely focused. He was going to speak God's truth without apology and he didn't care who he offended. This week John is still a feature of the Gospel Reading. And more specifically, in the verses that follow our Gospel Reading.

Many seemed confused about who John was. I think a good argument could be made that John himself didn't know who he was. I think John was simply driven by the Holy Spirit to do what he did. He could not help himself. For example, in the Gospel of John (no relation) we read:

John 1:19¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

So here we have John's denial that he is Elijah, the great prophet of old who was promised to return as the forerunner of the Messiah. And yet in the verses immediately following today's Gospel Reading we have Jesus, the Lord himself, tell a different story. Jesus said:

11:11¹¹"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. ¹³For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come."

Now it might be fun to discuss why there is this disagreement, but there is a bigger issue at hand today.

In today's Gospel Reading we find John near the end of his ministry. His selfless attitude and single-mindedness got him into trouble. He saw sin in King Herod's life and when he pointed it out to him and his wife, well, they didn't appreciate it. And so in today's reading, we find John in King Herod's prison where he will eventually lose his head.

Now if you have ever done any time in prison, you know that there is nothing else to do but reflect on your life choices. So perhaps John was reflecting on his own life and feeling a little sorry for himself when he began to think, "You know what? I'm not even sure that Jesus is really the Messiah! Here I am in big trouble, rotting away in prison, and for what? And besides, this Jesus, my own cousin, doesn't act like I thought a messiah would anyway."

Now mind you, I am putting words in John's mouth. I am speculating on what was going through his mind. But listen again to what Matthew wrote that John did do:

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

Isn't it interesting? In those verses that follow today's Gospel Reading Jesus was very clear about who he thought John was. But after it appeared as though his ministry, and in fact his very life might be coming to an end, John began to second-guess who Jesus was.

Imagine yourself in John's position. You have been driven by the Holy Spirit of the living God to be eccentric, abnormal, and unusual. That's right you're just plain weird and you can't help it. You dedicate your life to something that just controls you and as a result, some love you and think you are the greatest; and others loathe you and wish you were dead. Maybe you feel used. And what's worse, now you're not even sure that all you worked for is going to come to pass. And so you send a message to Jesus. And it's a sincere one: ³"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Again, if you are John, it's a fair question. 'Look dude, I just gave my life for you. Can you at least tell me whether my life is being spent in vain or not?'

Jesus could have responded in several different ways I suppose. Could have simply sent a message back, “Yes, love J.” Jesus could have gotten angry, “What is the matter with you? You don’t understand either? Cous, I am so disappointed!”

No instead, he replied in a way that ought to be more satisfying than words:

⁴“Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the 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. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

I thought about Jesus’s answer a lot this week. Why couldn’t he have just uttered the words “yes” or “no?” Why does Jesus always seem to answer a question with a question, a riddle, or a parable? But then it occurred to me that Jesus gave a great answer. Think about it, if he would have simply answered yes or no, that would have satisfied no one because then people would debate whether he met their standard of a messiah. That might even have been John’s reply had the answer come back yes or no.

But Jesus is too smart to get into an argument over whether he is messiah-ly enough or not. Jesus worked for an audience of one, his Father, and he was not going to be manipulated by popular demand.

So Jesus answered John’s question, not so much with words but with action. He said, “Go and tell ... 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.”

Jesus just said volumes in those few words, didn’t he?

We don't know how John responded. We don't even know if he ever got the message. But that's ok because it doesn't matter anymore if John was convinced, and satisfied.

A member of the little church up north asked if I could call on his mother from time to time and so I did. Netty was not a member of any church, and though I never asked her, I am not sure she was even a Christian. The reason I say that is because one time she told me she thought 'that whole Christianity deal was a racket.'

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

The question I have for you today is this. Is John's question your question? Do you wonder if this whole Christianity deal is a racket? Let's face it, it's been two-thousand years since he said, "I'll be back."

And here is another question for you: How do you respond when your un-churched friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors ask you what church is all about, and why you spend so much time and money on it? What do you say when they ask you, "Do you really believe all that stuff?"

I was explaining to Seven, our new Communications Administrator, that each week we shift back and forth between Confession and one of the Creeds (Apostles or Nicene). The reason for reciting the Creed is

- to remind ourselves of what we believe amid things too difficult for us to understand.
- It is our thumb in the eye to the devil and all his empty promises;
- it is our response to unbelievers that a life modeled after our Lord Jesus, matters.

It matters to us Creed-reciters, and it matters to those we minister to. Those we feed and clothe and supply and comfort and any number of other services we provide – why? Because it mattered to Jesus, and he is our Lord.

Jesus, are you for real? We gather every week and worship you and learn from you how we need to order our lives, we do some things that don't seem to make any

difference at all, and now it's been over two-thousand years! Are you for real or should we be looking for another?

Jesus' response is "what do *you* see and hear? *You* are my witnesses. I told you when I left that I leave my ministry in *your* hands. *You* need to continue on my behalf. I told you I would not leave you alone but would send *you* the Holy Spirit to guide *you*. I told you, *you* would do greater things than I have accomplished. Do you need me to have that long list of the things *you* do every day reviewed again? So go and tell what *you* have seen and heard. You could not have accomplished all that *you* have done without my lordship in your lives.

So now this is me, Pastor Jesse, speaking to you. Go and tell what you have seen and heard. That regular fallible broken mortals like you and I can be used by our Lord to do great and wonderful things.

So maybe John was having a little crisis of faith. We can forgive him. We've probably been there or will be there. When we get there, we too might need to reflect a little - that's all it will take - to recognize Jesus's lordship in our lives and in the lives of this congregation. I don't think you will be able to do that and come to the conclusion that Jesus *isn't* the powerful Son of God, Savior of the world, defender of the poor, deliverer of the needy, the crusher of the oppressor.

And when you have come to that conclusion let me remind you that you have something to say. So go and tell what you see and hear.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, it's been two-thousand years and you have not returned. Forgive us when we have moments of doubt. When that happens help us to reflect on the power of your Spirit living within us so that we might be empowered by what we see and hear you doing through us. And then inspire us to go and tell. We pray this in your name. Amen