

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, December 15, 2019
3rd of Advent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A

First Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10

Second Reading: James 5:7-10

Gospel Reading: Matthew 11:2-11

Sermon Title: “Light of Joy”

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.

Text

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 this eccentric prophet in the style of the great prophets of Israel. His exterior was pretty 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 in the gospel and we find him near the end of his ministry. His cavalier attitude and single-mindedness has gotten 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 fuss about things. 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 really act like I thought the Messiah would anyway."

Now mind you, I am putting words in John's mouth. I am speculating on what might have been going on in his mind. But listen again to what Matthew wrote that John actually 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?"

Imagine yourself in John's position. You have been driven by the Holy Spirit of the living God to be abnormal, eccentric, and unusual. 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 loath 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: "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 several different ways I suppose. He could have simply sent a message back, "Yes, love Jesus." Jesus could have gotten angry and replied back, "What is the matter with you? You don't understand either? Cuz, I am so disappointed!"

No instead, he replied in a way that he thought was more satisfying than words:

"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' 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, or a riddle, or a parable? But then it occurred to me that Jesus gave a really 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 was 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 with words but with action. Jesus just said volumes in those few words didn't he?

We find ourselves in a political season at full throttle. Politician with aspirations of the highest and most powerful position in the world are out to woo our vote. Occasionally they will refer to their records, that which they have accomplished, but what they really want us to hear is what they will do for us if we would just vote

for them. And I hate to be so cynical, but I suspect the majority of what we hear is good intentions that will never bear out in reality even when elected.

What if all they had to campaign on was what they really have accomplished, these congress men and women who waste the tax payer's time and resources on stonewalling and politicking and getting very little accomplished without padding every good bill with a whole bunch of senseless pork.

By contrast, Jesus' non-answer said it all. "Go and tell what you hear and see. Who else can deliver like I can?"

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

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? I've had people outside the church ask me that before. 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 someone outside the church, your un-churched friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors ask you what church is all about; 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?"

Well, I have answer for you and I have an answer for your friends: Out of this church with an average worship attendance of less than 250, we provide:

- food for hundreds of local families through our Food Distribution Ministry
- utilities, prescriptions, rental assistance and emergency housing
- blood drawings through RC.
- Sunday School and VBS for local children
- Sunday school and discipleship classes for people of all ages
- Special collections for LDR
- Grief Support Ministry
- Lutheran World Hunger

- Protestant Family Services
- Camp Scholarships
- Support for Camp Frederick
- College Care Packages
- Support of those in the military and veterans
- Thanksgiving Dinner for hundreds
- Live Nativity
- Ringing the bell for the SA RKC
- Make-A-Difference Day projects
- Corporate membership of SOV, Camp Frederick
- Nooners
- ZCELC
- VITA
- And this week I took two phone calls from people thanking us for the ministry we provided to two grieving families, and the decedents were not Zion members.

Now I have surely missed your favorite ministry I know, it only took me about two minutes to come up with that list, that's how easy it is.

And this is where I am going with this: If we added up all the time and money and in-kind donations we have made, we would be astonished at what we have done. If I set out an agenda of the things we are going to accomplish in 2020 that included all this stuff that I just mentioned and not one item more you would have thought I was nuts. We could never do all that!

Jesus, are you for real? We gather every week and worship you and learn from you on how we need to order our lives, we do some things that don't seem to make any difference at all, and furthermore it's been nearly 2020 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 it 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 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.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

This third week of Advent, with the theme of the "Light of Joy" we find our old friend John, rotting away in prison wondering if it was worth it, or will his life just be wasted. If we left here today contemplating that and that alone, I would agree that at face value there seems to be very little joy present.

But if we can take a step back from our own busy lives and see how just our lives have been affected by the ministry of Jesus, and what just we have done motivated by his example, then we would have to admit, the Light of Joy continues to be radiated by our lives.

And then compound that by what all the Christians in the world through their Christian churches have done and it would be hard not to acknowledge that Jesus is truly the King of the Universe, and the Messiah of God.

So maybe John was having a little crisis of faith. We can forgive him. We have been there, or will be there. When we get there, we too need to reflect just a little, that's all it will take, and recognize Jesus' lordship in our own lives and in the life 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, crusher of the oppressor.

Now go and tell what you have seen and heard; that regular, fallible, broken mortals like you and me can be used by our Lord to do great and wonderful things. Jesus is the Light of Joy. And because he is, we are too!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, it's been 2020 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. You are the Light of Joy, and

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you challenge us to be the Light of Joy in a dark world. Bless us, we pray, in your name. Amen