

Gospel**Matthew 11:2-11**

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?" Jesus answered them, "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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

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? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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.' 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."

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us.

John the Baptist's days are numbered. John is imprisoned by Herod because he publically condemned Herod's adulterous relationship with his brother's wife. This critique will cost him his life. Before he is beheaded, John waits in prison and begins to wonder if he really prepared the way of the Lord. From his cell, John is not confident that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. We can sympathize with John's confusion, trapped in prison, unable to see Jesus' ministry develop. He can only receive second hand stories of what Jesus is doing and naturally he begins to worry that his prophecy about the coming of the Christ was a big mistake.

So, John sends a message to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" He is basically asking Jesus, "Is my work done? Or do I need to pray for a way out of prison so I can proclaim the coming of some other Messiah?" From John's perspective, Jesus is not a clear cut savior of the world. He is not transforming the world into the kingdom of God by separating the wheat from the chaff and burning them with unquenchable fire. We have the gift of 2000 years of hindsight. But today's Gospel challenges us to recognize that Jesus' ministry was ambiguous and a little less than John expected.

I think it is often the case that our human expectations of ministry are exaggerated in ways that God never intends. For instance, we may discern a call to feed the poor with a soup kitchen ministry and imagine thousands of hungry souls flocking to our door. When in reality, perhaps God is calling us to serve ten homeless people who really need us to reach out and know them personally and intimately. Or perhaps we feel called to start an afterschool ministry for children and we imagine our buildings overflowing with vibrant youth, eager to learn and full of untapped talent. When in reality, perhaps God is calling us to minister to ten kids who are struggling because English is their second language and the school can't offer them enough personalized attention. It is never the case that the ten people we serve are somehow less of a success story. God knows the measure of our ministry. God knows that how deeply we can touch the life of another human being loving them as a precious child of God. It is our human yardstick that sometimes confuses quantity for quality and drama for depth.

Jesus answers John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." In other words, "I cannot convince you that I am the Messiah. You have to discern for yourselves if the

results of my ministry are bringing near the kingdom of heaven.” The blind receive their sight – but all blindness is not eradicated from the earth. The lame walk – but not every lame person on the planet. The lepers are cleansed – but there is still leprosy. The captives are set free – but only those held captive by disease. Jesus’ ministry does not set John free from prison. So, you can see, the ministry that God is calling Jesus to undertake falls short of the larger-than-life expectations that John and others were anticipating.

It is amazing to me that the authors of the Gospels went to such great pains to show us the complex web of human anticipation and disappointment with God’s plan of salvation. They could have written a seamless story of how Jesus’ ministry solved every ounce of suffering, punished the wicked and raised up the oppressed. But somehow, even with our human inclination to shine up the story and remove the messiness, Matthew doesn’t do that. Matthew pulls back the curtain and says, “Look, Jesus is the Messiah, but sometimes the incarnation of God isn’t overwhelmingly obvious.” Sometimes, we have to believe that God’s plan for salvation is unfolding right before our very eyes and we can’t begin to see the implications and outcomes of these seemingly small movements of the Holy Spirit.

I have adopted a practice of visiting every homebound person in the parish in the weeks preceding Christmas and Easter. I learned this pastoral discipline from the Rev. Jim Ransom while I served at Trinity and I remember the first Advent I spent in living rooms and bedside tables. I block off about six days on my calendar in the last two precious weeks of Advent and commit them to visiting those who cannot attend church on Christmas Eve. When I sacrifice those days to pastoral ministry I know that I am giving up any grand plans that I have for making Christmas more powerful, more dramatic, larger-than-life. I simply won’t have time to worry about it. Instead, I’ll be celebrating Christmas with the elderly, the blind, the lame, and the deaf, and sharing communion with them.

Every year I am both grateful and mystified that this simple pastoral ministry of visiting the home-bound communicates the depth and quality of God’s love for people. When I share communion with people who are confined to their homes, these captive souls are set free, the blind see, the lame walk, and the deaf hear because the kingdom of heaven has come near to them. Every year I am blessed by the opportunity to spend my time celebrating Christmas in a quiet way that ushers in the incarnation without dramatic excess, but with a profound experience of God’s love for every one of us. I have to let go of my exaggerated vision of celebrating Christmas with a cast of thousands who arrive in droves to become members of St. Mark’s on the Hill. God’s plan for salvation never unfolds in that way. God’s transforms us in quiet personal conversation and deep intimate relationships, this is the way that the Messiah comes into the world.

The collect for this third Sunday of Advent begins, “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us.” When God stirs up God’s power, it never looks like human power. When God stirs up divine power it penetrates deep to transform the community one life at a time. When God stirs up divine power it teaches the community to love and minister to the sick, the elderly, and those who have nothing to give in return. When God stirs up divine power, God comes in the form of an infant baby, tiny and helpless, and given to dwell among us with a great might of love for the whole world. The kind of power transforms us from within and inspires us to share the love of God because the kingdom of heaven has come near and we are changed by the incarnation.

In this last week before Christmas is upon us, I invite you to ask God to stir up your life with God’s power. Pray for a way to quietly share the deep personal relationship you have with

Christ. Ask for an opportunity to spend quality time with someone who is held captive in their own body. When you are presented with these ministries, do not underestimate the way that the Messiah is revealed in the world. It is never through the dramatic larger than life spectacles of human design. It is always through the quiet and powerful ways that we share the love of Jesus with one another. It is always through the deep and intimate ways that we proclaim the Gospel that God came and dwelled among us in the humble life of an infant child who brings salvation to the world.

Amen.