

December 11, 2023 - Isaiah 35:1-10, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11

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“Questions in the Waiting”

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.”

On Friday Nat had a doctor's appointment that required him to have a ride home, so I went with him. I knew the doctor was running late, but the appointment was taking a lot longer than they said it would. Other people were being called back and coming out all while he was still back there. Now, some important context that Nat has given me permission to share: Nat does not do well in medical settings - he gets pretty squeamish around needles and blood and doesn't like coming face to face with the reality that we are mortal very often. For example, when I got an epidural during labor, he had to distract himself in another part of the room because he couldn't handle the giant needle. Or when we bring our kids to the doctor and they have to get vaccines, if there is an option, I'm the person who has to help the nurse hold them down on the table for the shots. I will say he does great with vomit, which I don't handle very well - so we make a good parenting team.

Anyway, as I sat in that waiting room, watching through the foggy glass door to see if the next person walking down the hallway might be Nat, I started to become convinced that something had gone awry. He'd fainted and they couldn't proceed or something really strange, and more serious, had happened and he wasn't okay. Which caused my thoughts to go down the worry spiral to the point where I was trying to comfort myself about how I would do an okay job raising our two kids by myself.

It sounds dramatic when I'm saying it out loud to you now because he, thankfully, ended up being just fine, and the doctor really was just running a lot later than I realized. But we all know we're not always so lucky in these situations. We all know that the test results sometimes come back as cancer or that there are medical emergencies at what are supposed to be simple doctors appointments. We all know that car accidents and falls and overdoses happen. We all know that life is precarious, that

suffering is inescapable, and things don't always go as we had hoped or imagined.

Waiting is hard. And in the absence of a response, without answers to questions we might have, our minds make up all sorts of stories about what is happening and what it all means. Waiting can often cause us to *Question. Everything.*

It is in this waiting place that we encounter John in our Gospel lesson for today. He has been so certain of his mission, of his place in the arc of history as the person who would prepare the way for the coming Messiah. But when he ends up face to face with the terrible realities of our world, stuck in the prison cell awaiting his own execution - alone, suffering, and definitely without immediate answers, he finds himself *Questioning.*

Everything. Even whether Jesus is the Messiah he has been proclaiming and for whose coming he has been helping others to prepare.

Waiting is even hard for John the Baptist. Waiting, especially waiting in isolation, especially in the face of suffering and the unknown, makes even the most certain, the most zealous, the most resolved amongst us doubt our realities, what we hold dear, and ultimately ourselves.

I hope, however, that today's Gospel lesson puts you at ease a bit. First - because even John the Baptist doubted himself, his life mission, his faith and what was possible - you are most definitely not alone in any of the questions or doubts you experience. I also hope you are put at ease a bit in hearing Jesus' response to John's doubts.

Given the relationship between Jesus and John - given that John baptized Jesus - and I imagine he saw the spirit, like a dove, and heard the voice proclaiming Jesus as God's son - John should not have questioned whether Jesus is the Messiah. He's seen as

much with his very eyes! And yet when John isn't sure Jesus doesn't chastise him, instead Jesus tells the messengers to tell him what they've seen and heard. To tell him the stories of Jesus mission and ministry - stories of healing, of hope, of people restored to themselves and to community. That is how you know that Jesus is the Messiah for whom we have been waiting - through healing, hope, and people restored.

Not only does Jesus not chastise John, he lifts him up. When the messengers have left to return to John, he turns to the crowd who is gathered and reminds them that John is not simply a great prophet, but more than a prophet. He praises John for being great... and yet he also teaches that in God's realm even the least are greater than John.

The reality about which Jesus preaches and teaches, the reality that is made known as Jesus has gone about his ministry of restoration and liberation is far more good and true and full of love

than anything we can imagine or comprehend here and now. And yet, it is made known through the here and now.

There are some Christians who want to tell a story that there is no room for questions or doubts in the Christian faith. That if - or I might suggest *when* - you find yourself in a time of waiting, in a time where you're face to face with deep suffering for yourself or others, and it causes you to question everything - you just don't have enough faith. Or you're just not Christian enough. Or some other lie that simply isn't true. As writer Anne Lamott says, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty."

The world is indeed full of suffering, we cannot escape it, no matter how hard we try. We are all bound to doubt ourselves, our life mission, or our faith now and then - whether in the face of suffering or not. Today we are reminded that Jesus doesn't only praise the great prophets who doubt, he assures us that God's

realm is not dependent upon us or our faith - it is far more good and true and full of love than we can even comprehend.

God's grace for us and for the world is not grounded in our action or inaction, but in God's love and generosity alone. And when we do voice our doubts, when the ground of our faith is shaken, Jesus reminds us, like John, that we are not alone. That our life's work is not for nothing. That we can look around and testify to what we see and hear, to notice the ways - small or large - in which God's realm is being made known in spite of us.

Take, for example, the disaster of our changing climate. I imagine that many of us struggle now and then to feel like we can do much to actually change the tide, to slow things down. The forest fires, hurricanes, floods, and droughts lead many of us to a place of despair for how bad it's become - and how it might only get worse. And yet, at the same time, the way the snow sparkles against the clear blue sky after a snowstorm or a particularly cold

night inspires awe. Or the animal tracks in your yard remind you of the life beyond our human sphere that continues to find a way to survive. Or the bright oranges and pinks of the afternoon sunset at 4pm catches your eye and causes you to pause for a minute in the midst of a busy season. There is immeasurable suffering and unanswered questions. We are indeed waiting for the reign of God to become a reality - and yet signs of God's presence with us, reminders of God's generous grace are everywhere.

As Pastor Jen mentioned in the Children's sermon this morning, the 3rd Sunday in Advent is often the Sunday of Joy, the Sunday in which we take a break from the Advent shadows and allow ourselves to experience the joy of what we anticipate on Christmas - the immense love of God made flesh. God *with* us.

Although this story doesn't seem to be one of great joy, seeing John's doubts and questions gives us the opportunity to see

ourselves in the text. Knowing that even John, who confidently proclaimed Christ's coming throughout the wilderness, who baptized him in the Jordan River and still questions who Jesus is, whether he is the Messiah about which is prophesied, when faced with suffering and waiting alone without answers in uncertain circumstances, reminds us that doubts and questions are simply a part of being a faithful person. You are not alone in questioning everything.

Let us rest in the promise embedded in Jesus' response to John - that God's grace is always and only God's to give. That signs of God's coming reign all around and within us, God's beloved, even in the hardest of times.

In that promise we find great joy. Today, may that joy be yours.

Amen.