

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

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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.

John the Baptist is back. Last week the Gospel lesson recorded his message. He was out in the wilderness yelling at people to repent. He called the people a brood of vipers and mentioned that one was coming to baptize with fire. One writer has dubbed John the Baptist as "one of the most dramatic and, in some ways, one of the most overbearing figures in the New Testament."

How would you like to listen to this man every Sunday morning? A thundering voice preaching the fierce and fiery judgement of God. He was sure of his own calling to announce the coming Messiah. The message has an impact that has lasted for two thousand years. There is no doubt that this was a man of God. (Apparently he didn't have any.)

But, can we identify with him? Can we see ourselves in his place? With that kind of urgency? With that kind of confidence in viewing the situation and announcing judgement? Does John the Baptist remind you of you? Not very many of us.

It's different in the Gospel lesson this morning. Today we see John the Baptist...not a forceful, eloquent preacher, but a prisoner. He has arrested; his spirit is quiet. He does not have a bold proclamation. He has question. "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

He was being held in Herod's prison and he would never get out alive. He was wondering what he had devoted his life to. He told people Jesus as the Messiah. Was he?

At one time John had a purpose and a sense of meaning. He had goals, objectives, ambitions, aims. He is not so sure anymore. He had been put in prison and he couldn't find meaning for his life. He couldn't find a way to do what he had always done.

Now, let's ask the question: Can we identify with John the Baptist? Can we see ourselves in his place? A life suddenly stopped from what it is supposed to be doing. Life seems meaningless, empty, no purpose, deadly dull and depressing.

Perhaps it's happened to you, an accident, a tragedy, frustration, a broken relationship - anything that takes the joy out of life. And life can become going through the motions with no purpose – activity with no goal.

No matter what we want out of life, no matter what our hopes may be, isn't it the case that we all really want a life with meaning?

John the Baptist felt himself on the verge of losing just that. All that he had lived for could be wasted, worthless, pointless. He had spent his life announcing the coming of the Messiah. He told everybody it was Jesus. What if he was wrong? "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" "Has my life been meaningless?"

So John asked the deep question. "Where do I go to look for God?" Can God be found by looking at the natural wonders of the world? Can he be found by gazing deep within ourselves, trying to find a divine spark? Do we find God in others? Where does one find God? Is God to be found in Jesus?...Or do we look for another?

John asks the basic question that comes to all of us if we are honest enough to think about our faith. We have to have meaning in our lives. We have to have God in our lives. Where will we find him? John admitted that he had a faith problem. He didn't beat around the bush or cover up his doubts.

And Jesus was just as direct. A blunt question from John the Baptist received a very specific answer. "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."

John the Baptist was in prison, about to be executed. In his last days he wanted to know what he had dedicated his life to. He wanted to know who this Jesus was. He wanted to know if he had wasted his life. Had he been wrong all along?

"Are you the Christ?"

Jesus does not say, "Yes, and I'm going to find a way to make myself secure. I'll get some money and friends and stay around for generations." Jesus does not say, "Yes, I'm the Christ, and I've got a good argument to convince people of the fact." Jesus simply points to what he does. Jesus does not make a distinction. "Yes, I am the Christ and, incidentally, this is what I do." And we cannot say, "We are the Church, and, incidentally, this is what we do. Incidentally, this is our mission."

The only way Jesus bothered to identify himself was by what he did.

God is not just known by what he does. God is what he does. When we turn to the scriptures to learn who God is, we find stories of what God has done. Christianity is what Christ does. And the Christian Church cannot be known apart from what it does.

The Church is the Body of Christ. How healthy is Christ in the world? A Christ who is known strictly by what his Church does in this world? How healthy is he?

Imagine that two of John the Baptist's disciples have come to our service this morning. Picture them walking down the aisle here. John is in prison and he has sent a question to us.

"Are you the Church of Jesus Christ, or shall we look for another?" Our response must be what it has always been: "Tell him what you hear and see." – But what will we say after that? "Just look at how often we read the scriptures at home, no wait...don't tell him that. See our prayer life...no, just a minute...See how we embody God's love and never say anything that would hurt someone's feelings or reputation...well, we keep it to a minimum...uh, tell you what, we'll call a meeting and vote on it and get back to you." Not very comforting words with which to send John the Baptist to his executioner.

It is that desperate. The needs are that immediate.

The world is still in prison. Just as John was in prison the first time the question was asked. Our brothers and sisters are still imprisoned by sin and pain and poverty. People are lonely. People have run out of hope. They've heard stories of Christ but they need to know. Is he the one? Is God's love alive? For an answer they turn to see what Christ is doing in the world. They look to the Church.

Let us pray to God that we never look up from our task as the Church and see these people in the prison of hopelessness. People who are watching us for some sign that the Messiah has come, and feel ourselves compelled to say, "Well, I guess you'd better look for another."

The definition of the Church is "The Body of Christ." As we spend our lives sharing the good news, feeding, healing, being the Church, let us undertake every task with this in mind...Is what we are doing an answer to the question: "Is this He who is to come?"

When you wake up each morning, set that purpose before yourself. "This day, I will answer that question. I will tell the prisoners that Christ **is** the one who is to come. There is no need to look for another."

I will proclaim the good news in everything I do. There are prisoners on the other side of the world who have never heard that God has become a human to live with us and love us and share our burdens. If I can't go tell them myself, I will be part of a Church that sends people to

them. I will support that effort with my prayers, and my money and my encouragement. There are prisoners of injustice whose homes and families are torn apart and there is no peace. I will show who Christ is by educating myself, writing letters, voting, praying. If those two disciples come on behalf of the imprisoned and look around they must see compassion for the hungry. They must see the body of Christ speaking kindly about one another, telling the truth. They must see people who will stop what they are doing and listen to someone who doesn't really have anything to say, just because that person is lonely and wants to talk. The two disciples must see parents who are willing to tell their children that they love them, even at the risk of being laughed at. They must see people who know that what they do with their lives is dedicated to the glory of God. If that is done in an office, or homemaking, or in retirement, or in a classroom, those lives are dedicated to God and those lives shout out to the people in prison, "What do you see? Don't you see that God's love is alive in this world?"

Christ is known by what his Church does in the world. Our task is before us. It is a monumental task, but the resources are even greater. Being the Body of Christ will take everything we've got - but that is available. We have everything that we've got to use. It will take everyday of our lives - but we have everyday of our lives.

When hopelessness asked who Jesus was, he answered "Look at what I do." The answer is still the same.

Let's show what God does through Jesus Christ. Let's live our lives bringing the grace of God into the world. Let's live lives that show there are not as many hungry people in the world as there were. There are not as many people who are lonely. Let's live lives that will make this congregation strong, a place for children to learn God's love. Folks who were worried have been reassured. People who didn't know have begun understanding new things.

God is alive. God is in the lives of his people. And with God in our lives, those lives have meaning.