

**December 15, 2019 Sixth Sunday of Advent**

**Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan**

**Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 11:2-11**

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the eleventh chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

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

<sup>7</sup>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? <sup>8</sup>What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup>What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup>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.’

<sup>11</sup>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.”

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Last week, we met John the Baptist out in the wilderness...and heard him preaching about preparing for the one who was to come. He seemed so confident...almost brazen...unafraid of the powers that opposed the message of God. And today, we’ve skipped ahead in Matthew’s gospel timeline to the next time John appears in the story. A lot has happened in between, though. Jesus has been tempted, gathered followers, and taught, and healed, and cast out demons, and calmed a storm...and he has also sent out his disciples into the world to do the work, as well, apart from him...sent out in God’s power. Also, in the meantime (though we don’t read about until a flashback in Matthew 14...a few chapters from now)...John has gotten himself arrested by Herod. We meet him today in the prison where his life will eventually end.

And in this moment, we see a John who doesn't seem to have quite the same confidence as when he was calling the people out into the Jordan River...or...for that matter...when he was calling out Herod for his sins. Isolated and suffering now...John sends a question to Jesus... "Is it really you?"

Even the one who was among the first to point to Jesus and tells us who he was...wondered for a moment if he really got it right.

And Jesus' answer wasn't to scold him...or to be offended by the question. But he also doesn't just tell us the answer. (Which is very on-brand for him.) So then...how does Jesus answer John's doubt and ours? It's really quite amazing...

Jesus reminds John (and his friends who have been sent to ask the question) to believe their own eyes and ears and hands and hearts...to trust that they had words to say about what they had seen that would reveal who Jesus really was...

Jesus asks them to consider what they have seen happening around him...but also what brought them out to the wilderness to begin with: "What did you go out to see?" (Jesus asks a version of this question four different times in this short reading.) He seems to be saying, "Remember what has drawn you out into the unfamiliar, the risky, the new places." He is telling John and his followers and us...that we know...we know about what it is to be pulled towards God's presence...He tells them to remember....and to trust their own eyes and ears and hearts. God is close. You have come close to God. And you can believe the witness of your own life.

Think of a place where you have found yourself...where you were drawn by a power bigger than you. Think of what you saw there...and hear Jesus say: you know what you saw. You know God was there. Even if it feels hard to believe today...or if no one would take you seriously if you said it out loud.

(Now, of course...it's a little bit more complicated than that, isn't it? There is another side to this coin of trusting in our own witness and experience. If we know anything about eye-witness testimony...we know that two witnesses often have different stories of the same event. All you have to do is start telling family stories around a holiday dinner table to remember that no one remembers anything quite exactly the same. So...once we all start believing that we can trust what we see and hear and touch of God's presence in the world...we will also start to realize that we don't all see or hear or touch the same things.

Jesus doesn't give us a straightforward answer to the question of who he is today...because he wants to draw us together...to share our stories...and yes...to discover that we have seen different things. We get to carry on in the light of the truth that Jesus gave *all* permission to trust our eyes and ears and hands and hearts...not just me or you or us...but everyone...so...when we can't reconcile our testimony...we struggle in love to discover more, dig deeper, knit ourselves together...and learn even more from one another who God is...than if Jesus had just told us.)

What a gift. What a messy, beautiful, strange, and sometimes unwelcome gift. And a gift we need so much. God is going to keep giving us to one another...over and over again...until we learn how much we really need each other.

And...maybe as much as learning to trust ourselves...maybe now more than any other time of year...we also realize that sometimes we just don't see or hear or touch or know or have any confidence at all...We may not feel like we have testimony to give. Even John had that time in his life. It's ok to need someone to tell you again what it looks like and feels like when God seems so close. You are not alone. God also gives us to one another so that when we can't see or hear or believe...someone else can tell the story...can carry us in our doubt and questions.

And finally...I'll just speak for myself on this one...I also know myself, and I know that sometimes I just don't see what's in front of my face. It's not that I can't believe or see or hope...it's that I'm not paying attention. I just don't hear what has been said...even if it's said more than once. Sometimes I am simply not paying attention to the right things. And...in those moments I hear good news today, too...When I'm being obtuse and willfully ignorant, I am pulled back to Isaiah's vision of the pathway being made through the desert. It's a beautiful vision...but one of the most comforting things to me about this picture Isaiah paints...is when he says,

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

I might have a place on God's road...in spite of myself...if even in God's perfected, well-watered, safe and joyful future...if even there God makes room for fools. Did you catch that? That Isaiah makes the point to say that “not even fools will go astray...” presupposes that God fully welcomes the ones we would call fools...onto the Holy Way.

And if there will be fools there...maybe I can be there when I'm not even paying attention...

The season of waiting...of hoping...yes...of questioning...and wondering...continues. We aren't there yet. And we are still wondering who we are...who our neighbors are...and if we will find our way to where God is being born into this world. And if it's really him that we see.

And when the goodness of God and the power of Jesus feel distant...when we are isolated...when we are still waiting...and when we are unsure...the promise holds us just like it held John...and...we continue to wait and watch...

We will continue to be offered food for the journey and the gift of a human family that can tell the story with us of how close God has come...of what we have seen...of who God has been for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.