

Sermon

Advent 3 A – Isaiah 35:1-10, Psalm 146:5-10, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11

An Unexpected Messiah

Not even John the Baptist expected the reign of God that Jesus advanced

At first appearance

John the Baptist

preached with confidence

about the fulfillment of God's ancient promises.

But what we hear from the prophet

depends upon the group with which we identify.

To the down-trodden he offered a word of hope.

Poverty, violence, and oppression would be extinguished

at the Advent of Messiah.

While to those whose wealth caused many to be poor,

whose power created victims,

and whose oppression crushed hope

John's message was a sober warning.

So while the "have nots" waded into the Jordan

to have their faint hopes revived,

the "haves" came forward to have their sins washed away

and to be softened and opened up to a new age

in which justice and compassion were exercised for all.

But not *all* of the "haves."

Some of the Pharisees and Sadducees scoffed at John,

for his insistence that there was something in the waters of repentance and cleansing for them.

They denied their own sin,

and the need for a saviour.

And Herod,

Rome's appointed King of the Jews,

took offense at John's bluntness

and had him thrown into prison.

(John has dared, publicly,

to denounce Herod's marriage

to his half-niece.)

So while John languishes there,

perhaps readying himself for execution,

he asks his visitors, his disciples,

to carry a final message to Jesus.

Weeks earlier John had welcomed Jesus at the river,
and Baptised him.

But now the once-bold preacher was having second thoughts.
His confidence and bravado seem to have evaporated.

Because not even John could imagine what Jesus' mission was supposed to look like.

Some expected Messiah to issue a call to arms,
in an effort to drive the Romans from Galilee and Judea by force.

Others expected an in-your-face preacher
to condemn political and religious leaders whose quest for respectability and privilege
did not line up with their adherence to the Laws of Moses.

Most expected someone like John:
only a little less rough around the edges.

But Jesus was neither a general nor a judge.

Even as he recruited a zealot to his 12-member team,
he spoke of turning the other cheek
and forgiving one's enemies,
rather than plotting ambushes and assassinations.

Remember that Jesus explicitly asked his best friend Peter
to lay down a sword when the police came to arrest him.

And though,
as Jesus got closer and closer to Jerusalem
and arguments with religious leaders intensified,
he remained open to the possibility of transformation.

He ate with the tax collectors Matthew and Zacchaeus.
He taught the Pharisees Nicodemus.
From the cross he prayed that God would forgive the soldiers and council which had condemned him.

So when John's disciples ask Jesus about his mission
Jesus asks them to tell John about what he was doing
(not just saying).

The blind see.
The lame walk.
The lepers are cleansed.
The deaf hear.
The dead are raised.
The poor hear Good News.

This familiar formula is introduced in the words of John's father, Zechariah,
at news of his wife Elizabeth becoming pregnant in old age.

It is magnified in Mary's song
At the news that she would bear the Messiah.
Jesus proclaimed it in the synagogue in Nazareth,
at the start of his public ministry.
And repeated in the Sermon on the Plains.
All in Luke's Gospel.

In Matthew the same mission is prominent in the parable of the sheep and goats,
Where both groups are stunned to learn that Jesus is present "in the least of these."

All of these based on the writings of the psalmists
and the prophets, including Isaiah.

In Messiah's reign
weapons become gardening tools.

Self-righteous judgement gives way to humility.
And mercy.

The Bible is full of these kinds of surprises;
people expecting God to be *this* way,
and God appearing *that* way instead.

The first man and woman ate the forbidden fruit
because they thought God wanted to control them.

Abraham and Sarah doubted God's promise,
because they assumed they were too old.

Joseph's brothers were shocked to meet their brother in Egypt
welcoming them with open arms.

When he was hiding in a cave Elijah didn't expect God to be able to find him,
and when he did he was certain God would sound like thunder or feel like an earthquake;
not in a still small voice.

Naaman, the Assyrian general who was plagued by leprosy,
nearly missed out on being healed
because he thought that washing in the Jordan River was too ordinary a thing.

Jonah was convinced that God hated his enemies,
and sulked when God forgave the people of Nineveh.

A shepherd boy named David slew mighty Goliath with a pebble and a sling.

God became a human being at the first Christmas.

Jesus' death on the cross was not a failure,
but sin's forgiveness,
and life's victory over death.

Peter dreamed of a sheet filled with unclean animals
and took it to mean that Gentiles could become followers of Jesus.

Persecutor Paul was blinded by the light of Christ,
and become his leading missionary.

And God claimed you and you and you and me
in the waters of Baptised,
and made us his own forever,
even though God knew we'd mess up time and time again.

At this table, and hundreds of thousands of other like it,
ordinary bread,
and wine or grape juice,
become a banquet of grace.

In our natural, faithless state,
we imagine a God of superhuman power,
stern in his judgements.

It's even what John expected.

But Jesus tells us to look instead
for acts of healing, kindness, and compassion.

For an end to violence after violence.
An end to the kind of preachiness that has given the church a black eye.
An end to every overt or subtle message we send to those outside these walls
that we're better than they are.

Let's leave these things behind.

So that we might become ambassadors of healing, kindness, and compassion too.

Amen.