

“Are You the One to Come?”

Matthew 11:2-11

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The word Advent is derived from the Latin “*adventus*” meaning “coming” or “arrival” and it refers to that joyful season on the Christian calendar which anticipates the “coming” of Jesus Christ--God’s son--into our BROKEN world. But even MORE fundamental than setting the stage for Christ’s birth, Advent ALSO invites us to look forward to the day when Jesus Christ--the King of the Universe--will return in power and glory at the end of history. In fact, for the Early Church, Christ’s SECOND ADVENT or COMING held greater significance for them than his FIRST, with his birth. What I would like to do this morning is to FURTHER EXPAND our understanding of Advent to include, no less, Christ’s “coming” (or advent) INTO EACH OF OUR LIVES- how he can break through our toughest mental and spiritual prisons to deliver us from our personal doubts and deepest fears and replace them with his OWN faith and hope.

Now when we think of Jesus’ FIRST Advent and those biblical characters who dominate the Christmas season like Mary and Joseph, the angels and shepherds, King Herod and the Magi, one name that DOESN’T IMMEDIATELY come to mind is John the Baptist. Yet Luke’s Gospel opens, not with the Holy Family and all the drama surrounding Christ’s birth but with the account of JOHN’S birth- to a Temple priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin. And then, rather curiously, right after John is born, he disappears from the Christmas narrative altogether only to reappear many years later when Jesus is ready to inaugurate his ministry and he requests John to baptize him in preparation for his mission.

Our initial impression of John is that he comes straight out of the mold of the Old Testament prophets- he is a bold and courageous Elijah-like figure who was unsparing and unafraid in his criticism of BOTH the religious and political authorities for all their lies and pretense. He had proclaimed that with the Messiah’s coming, God’s judgment was now at hand, that the ax was being laid at the root, ready to chop down those trees that did not bear fruit while the chaff would be burnt with unquenchable fire. But in this morning’s lesson, we see another man ENTIRELY. He’d been a tireless critic of King Herod for marrying his brother’s wife and the consequence for such moral courage was to be arrested and incarcerated in one of the king’s most dreaded prisons- Machaerus or “The Black Castle” where he now awaits execution.

While imprisoned, John continues to receive reports about Jesus and his growing ministry which had to have left him puzzled and even concerned. NOW was the time to bring evil King Herod to judgment and to set about establishing his NEW kingdom of righteousness. However, INSTEAD of judgment and condemnation, Jesus was doing just the OPPOSITE- he was healing lepers, casting out demons, and even raising to life the servant of a Roman centurion- a man who was both a Gentile AND an enemy of the Jewish people. He was hanging out with the very ones who were supposed to be chopped and burned- eating with tax collectors, letting prostitutes wash his feet, and pronouncing forgiveness to Samaritans. John had seen Jesus as leading the vanguard of a world-wide revolution that would eventually shake the foundations of the world’s moral and social systems to their knees. As noble as Jesus’ actions might be- tending to the cries

of the weak and the helpless, the sick and the outcast, THAT wasn't going to end all the oppression and injustice in the world, nor would it inaugurate the long-awaited age of peace and justice John envisioned. Herod was still on the throne while the Pharisees and Sadducees continued to defraud and exploit God's people. NOTHING was changing!

Furthermore, Jesus had announced that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, and that he'd been anointed to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. If that was so, then when was he going to come and set HIM free! Here he was, Jesus' own cousin, God's faithful voice in the wilderness who had baptized him and sacrificed much on behalf of him, yet he remains locked up and alone in Herod's dungeon. With all the time in the world to think, he can't help but wonder when or even IF Jesus was going to use that same power to help HIM, to free him from his OWN set of chains. This whole line of reasoning then leads to the most frightening thought of ALL, that perhaps he had been WRONG about him, that just maybe Jesus WASN'T the long-sought Messiah he had presumed, AFTER all.

With such doubts now beginning to creep into his head, he manages to send word to two of his disciples to visit Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who is TO COME, or are we to expect SOME OTHER?" Keep in mind that John had grown up with Jesus and had doubtless heard the strange stories surrounding his birth. He'd been present at his baptism and thus saw with his own eyes the heavens open, the dove descend, and heard the words spoken from out of a cloud, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." It was John who had introduced Jesus to his own disciples as "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," and whose sandals he was not fit to tie? Yet, in just a year and a half's time, John has now gone from PERFECT FAITH to SUDDEN DOUBT, from CERTITUDE concerning Jesus's identity to CONFUSION AND SKEPTICISM as to his ministry.

Jesus' response to them was, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me." With these words, Jesus wants John to understand that through such personal and individual acts of healing and love and acceptance, the work of God was INDEED being done, that such are in fact the very HALLMARKS of his Father's kingdom.

Now I don't believe for a minute that John was ever concerned about dying for he knew from the outset that his faithfulness to God would probably cost him his life as it did the lives of countless OTHER prophets before him. Jesus attests to this when a few verses later, he summed up just what kind of person John was when he asked his followers:

*What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind?...A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and MORE than a prophet...Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist.* (Matthew 11:7-11)

Jesus thus testifies that John was as bold and courageous as any man who ever lived. Rather, I believe John was MORE concerned about THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND ITS RIGHTEOUSNESS than whether he lived or not. I don't believe he ever once felt sorry for himself, that if ANYTHING, he just wanted some assurance that he had not been wrong about

his cousin, that he had not wasted a good portion of his life pinning all his hopes on someone who in the end might not have been who he thought he was or perhaps had misunderstood the purpose of his mission ALTOGETHER. If so, that would have meant that everything he had done in preparation for the coming of the Messiah had been in vain. Nobody in the world knew and understood Jesus better than himself and yet maybe he didn't know him, AFTER all!

The Gospels are clear that John the Baptist was essentially a transitional figure in God's plan, that he was preparing the way for a NEW ERA in God's dealings with the world and his people; as he had earlier told his followers Jesus must increase while he must decrease. But John didn't quite grasp the NATURE of this change. From the start, his message was one of judgment and punishment against all unrighteousness. With the advent of the Messiah, he was confident that God's Day of Judgment would now crush all the corruption here on earth and make it all new. Hence, the John viewed the coming kingdom as a strict theocracy of law and order.

However, Jesus had a COMPLETELY DIFFERENT approach to sin and righteousness than John did. The fact is that Jesus represented a NEW covenant instead of the old, one which proclaimed forgiveness and compassion over judgment and perfect justice. Where John saw that JUDGMENT MUST PRECEDE BLESSING, for Christ it was just the OPPOSITE, that BLESSING MUST PRECEDE ALL JUDGMENT. The gospel or "good news" was that God loves persons who don't deserve such love or can ever earn it- it was a FREE gift that one can either receive or reject. God reaches out to us at the point of our deepest need to draw us to himself and make us his sons and daughters. This is a SPECIAL relationship that once we enter into it, can never change. God is our Father to the very end, and we are promised that NOTHING shall ever be able to separate us from either his presence or his love- EVER! And so Jesus, in contrast to John, was all about love and mercy and grace and compassion. His ministry involved helping the helpless and NOT those who could already help themselves. Rather than "an eye for an eye," our Lord's credo was "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself" for such summed up the message of the Law and Prophets.

Well, this morning, we TOO can take comfort in the fact that WE are God's children and that he has promised never to leave or forsake US. But then, what happens when our problems DON'T go away. For instance, what happens when we are told by the doctors that the cancer we thought had been in remission has now spread throughout the lymph system; or the current economic situation has forced the company we have worked so long and hard for to lay us off without warning thereby leaving us without a paycheck, a pension, or any health insurance to fall back on; or a son or daughter has gotten caught up in the grips of alcoholism or drug addiction and even the finest treatment centers in the area have been powerless to help; or the gerontologist informs us that the simple forgetfulness our spouse continues to demonstrate is actually the middle stages of Alzheimer's and WE ALONE are the sole caregiver. Thus, like John, we cry out to God wondering if God can hear us, wondering if he understands our plight or even CARES about us and our situation. Is he going to COME AND DELIVER US from OUR situation, from OUR own personal prisons which are every bit as real and terrifying as JOHN'S was? Is he going to suddenly and miraculously deliver my dear friend Phil Moran from the deadly grip of ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease) after Phil has given so many years of love and faithful service to Christ and his church? And so like Job, we begin bargaining with God. We

remind him how faithful we've been in times past and that we don't deserve to be treated so harshly by life and by him. And eventually some of us even find OURSELVES asking, "Are you REALLY the one to come or should we look for ANOTHER!"

What makes that question so CENTRAL is that it involves a question of TRUST for it asks whether God IS the one we can ultimately rely upon when the chips are down and there seems no other place to turn. We want to know that he holds our hand and will lead us through the darkest night when there is no light to help guide our steps. Well, the answer to that question is a definite YES, and it is YES for two very definite reasons. The FIRST is because regardless of all our questions and misgivings, OUR FAITH IS ALWAYS DEEPER AND STRONGER THAN ANY OF OUR DOUBTS. Doubts are ephemeral- they come and go according to our emotional state; they're often tied to circumstances that shift from one moment to the next. But FAITH, on the other hand- faith is instilled and nurtured in our lives from the day of our birth and remains deeper and more steadfast than ANY of our doubts. Faith is a trust based upon the knowledge of God's love for us and of his promise to never leave or reject us despite what may be our OWN FAITHLESSNESS TOWARDS GOD.

And SECOND, if faith is always greater than our doubt, then GOD IS ALWAYS GREATER THAN OUR FAITH. Our relationship with God is not based upon our ability or our strength to hold on to God. Nothing could be more foolish or self-defeating than to think that our relationship with God is entirely dependent upon US, that WE are somehow responsible for maintaining it. RATHER, the Bible is clear that GOD is the one always in control of the relationship; GOD is the one who holds OUR hand, even when we try to let go or sever that relationship for good. God created us and called us to himself when we did not know him or even WANT to know him that we might experience and share in his love. God is then the one who sustains that relationship by the constant outpouring of his grace and forgiveness into our lives. As God could never give up upon his people, the Jews, REGARDLESS of their constant faithlessness and disobedience, so God can never give up on US. That's what GRACE is ALL ABOUT, my friends- experiencing God's unmerited love time and time again until our resolve is eventually worn down and our hearts are won over by it. God loves us and promises to hold us tight REGARDLESS of our state of mind or the feelings within our heart, and that includes the condition of our faith. The reality is that THROUGHOUT our Christian life, we constantly oscillate between moments of doubt and faith, frustration and joy, inadequacy and confidence, and yet, through them all, God is able to teach us the meaning of such lessons as patience, humility, AND ABOVE ALL, continual trust.

Several years ago, CNN aired a film about Michael Morton, a man who spent 25 years of his life in prison for the death of his wife in 1986. However, the reality was that he was INNOCENT of the crime for which he was prosecuted and eventually convicted. Morton had just turned 32 when his beautiful wife and the mother of their three-year old son was brutally attacked and killed at their Texas home. Although he had a solid alibi, having been with friends that evening, and there being no scientific evidence, no eyewitness, no murder weapon, and no believable motive, he was STILL found guilty for her murder and sentenced to life in prison. Over the next quarter of a century, he only saw his son Eric twice a year until he decided to stop visiting entirely and even changed his name so as not to be associated with his father. Throughout all those years, Michael Morton never stopped protesting his innocence.

But then a few years ago, with the help of DNA testing, a group of attorneys working pro bono on Morton's behalf managed to bring the truth to light. Not only was he INNOCENT, but the prosecutor at the time was accused of withholding crucial evidence that could have EXONERATED him. They were able to show that the genetic material found in his wife's body belonged to a convicted felon who had killed ANOTHER woman in the Austin area less than two years later. When Morton was released in 2011, he was 57 years old with his most productive years behind him. "I thank God this wasn't a capital case," he said as he spoke to reporters at his release. What struck everyone, however, was the lack of anger he had for the prosecutor who has since been disbarred, and even for the man who committed the crime years before. "Other people often feel far more anger than I do," he said. "Vindication is very, very good, but it's something I knew all along...It's really nothing new for me."

He explained that while in prison, he had a religious epiphany and as a result had become a Christian. He credits his inner peace with the knowledge that God "loves me." He thanks God every day for the new life he now experiences, having reconciled with his son with whom he has since become very close. For Morton, the experience of prison itself is what led him to a GREATER AND MORE IMPORTANT freedom than being able to walk out of its front gates an innocent man. It was the INNER freedom of discovering that there are things FAR WORSE than physical incarceration, that there is going through life WITHOUT LOVE, WITHOUT HOPE, and WITHOUT JOY of any kind and that is a hell that one doesn't INHABIT so much as inhabits US. WITHOUT such qualities in our lives, we don't live, we merely EXIST.

Yes, we may experience doubts at various moments in our lives, but EVEN GREATER than all our uncertainties and wavering trust IN GOD is GOD'S deep and resolute faith IN US. It can't be stated MORE EMPHATICALLY that when we think we no longer HAVE such faith, when it seems our confidence and ability to trust Christ's words have become WEAK or DEPLETED, we can always take heart in knowing that God's faith IN US is ALWAYS far greater than our faith IN HIM and THAT must always serve as the basis of our hope. Advent is MUCH MORE than a season on the church calendar when we remember Jesus as coming into a very broken world- it is Jesus coming into our PERSONAL lives AS WELL. It represents Jesus--the Son of God--breaking through those tough prison walls within our OWN hearts and minds to deliver us from all suspicion and anger and hatred and self-reproach--EVEN AMID WHAT MIGHT SEEM AS MOUNTING QUESTIONS AS TO HIS FAITHFULNESS AND HIS LOVE--that he might restore to us AGAIN our confidence and our peace. We can be assured that even in those periods of GREATEST doubt, God promises to be there for us, that HE CAN and HE WILL overcome every obstacle and objection to come and carry us through to a living faith once again. May we all HOLD FAST to that promise and NEVER let it go! Let's pray...

*Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, you continue to love us despite ourselves, coming to us again and again even when we deny you, curse you, or seek to flee your presence. But such reactions are futile because your patience and your love eventually wear us down and we helplessly find ourselves surrendering to your will. Help us to trust in you even when all circumstances might point to the opposite, confident that you will help us to surmount every problem, every difficulty, every tragedy in life with your own personal presence. It is the CLEARTEST EVIDENCE of your love and concern for us. In Jesus' name we pray, amen and amen.*