

December 11, 2022
The Third Sunday in Advent
Year A
Matthew 11:2-11
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

John the Baptist Moments

I didn't talk about him at all, last week, but, last week our gospel reading was about John the Baptist. And he was on fire! I mean rhetorically. He had some powerful words to say about the work that God was doing in the world. He was full of passion and boldness. He knew that God had given him a calling to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, the "one coming after him" and he took to his task with enthusiasm. He had been preparing for it for this coming, for this Advent for most of his life and when the call came to go out to the Jordan river and to begin baptizing and preaching, he was ready. He had the words to say, words of comfort, words of challenging, words of preparation and warning.

This is what he said to the religious leaders of his time, to the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to him for baptism:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:7b-10).

Those are pretty bold, pretty courageous things for him to say to religious leaders who wielded both spiritual and worldly power. But he was not afraid. He knew the work that God had given him to do and he had no doubts. He went on to say,

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:11-12).

He had confidence in the message that he had to share and confidence that God would do what God had promised.

Last week's gospel reading did not include what comes next, but the very next thing to happen in the story of John the Baptist was that Jesus came to him, to be baptized in the Jordan River. And John was reluctant to baptize Jesus because he recognized that Jesus was the one that he had been talking about; that Jesus was the coming one, the more powerful one, the one he had talked about, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. It was clear to John that he should not be the one baptizing Jesus, that he should instead, receive Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. John said to Jesus, as Jesus stood before him in the waters of the Jordan, "I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14b).

But he baptized Jesus. Did he see the Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove? Did he hear the confirming voice, saying "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The gospel of Matthew is not completely clear whether that was a private moment for Jesus' eyes and ears alone, or whether it was a public moment, that John the Baptist and the others at the river were included in, but regardless of whether he saw and heard it, John seemed to be confident, in the way that he greeted Jesus, that Jesus was the one that he had been waiting for.

John's story seems to be one of confidence, courage, and faith. Until today.

Here we are, we have a Christmas tree up in our Sanctuary, and wreaths on our windows, and nativity scene figures moving ever closer to the stable and the manger but we have yet to have a Christmas story as our gospel reading. And today, we don't even, really have a getting ready story. We have a questioning story, a wondering story, it could even be called a doubting story.

By the time we get to today's gospel reading, things have gone downhill for John the Baptist, from his glory days at the Jordan river. It's sometime between a year and two years since he was out there preaching and baptizing, and one of the leaders that he spoke so boldly to had finally had enough.

Filled with his special confidence in God's power, God's nearness, and the absolute moral authority of God, that he was called to share, should it come as any surprise to us that John decided to confront none other than King Herod about the morality of his marriage. Herod was married to a woman named Herodias, who was his brother's ex-wife. According to Jewish law, it was illegal for a man to marry his brother's divorced wife, so John the Baptist, the one who had called the Pharisees and the Sadducees a brood of vipers, had no trouble at all calling courageously calling out Herod and Herodias's illegal marriage. But this time, things did not go well for him for his boldness. Instead of being allowed to continue his ministry, Herod had John arrested and thrown into prison.

Today is the Third Sunday in Advent and, instead of wearing blue, as I have every other Sunday this Advent, I'm wearing pink under my robe, because the third Sunday in Advent is Gaudete Sunday. Back when the colors of the Advent candles were purple, with one pink candle, the pink candle was for Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is Latin for "Rejoice!" and back when Advent was a more penitential season than it is now, Gaudete Sunday was a lightening up, purple to pink, of the Advent penitence and fasting as the church got closer to Christmas.

But in terms of readings, as least this year, if we want joy, we have to look at our reading from Isaiah, where we heard the words, "The wilderness and the dry land shall

be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing (Isaiah 35:1-2a). There's our Gaudete Sunday message, "Rejoice with joy and singing!"

We certainly don't find rejoicing in our gospel reading. Instead, in our gospel reading, we find what sounds to me like a demoralized John the Baptist sitting in prison and wondering if he had gotten the whole thing wrong. John the Baptist, sitting in prison, wondering if he had been wrong about Jesus all along. Because things weren't going the way that he had expected. He had expected an axe, cutting down the unrighteous. He had expected fire. He had expected the Holy Spirit overwhelming the land and the people. He had expected the world to be changed.

And instead, what did he get? Jesus, wandering through towns and villages telling stories, preaching peace, and healing, mostly ordinary people, bleeding women, gentile daughters, people who were blind, paralyzed, possessed by demons, even dead, but not the kind of people who could change the world, not the kind of people who would transform a nation.

Jesus' friends were fishermen and farmers and a tax collector. John had demanded that people clean up their act, but Jesus was hanging out with sinners, like I said, with tax collectors, even with prostitutes.

Where was the judgment? Where was the fire? Where was the whirlwind of the Holy Spirit. John had expected a tornado, but he was getting a zephyr. the Spirit, blowing through people's lives with such gentleness and kindness and warmth that, though lives may be changed, the world might never be.

So, John had a question. And, since he was in prison, he sent his followers to ask it. He sent them to Jesus to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matthew 11:3b)

John just wasn't sure anymore. Jesus just wasn't what he had expected.

This was Jesus' answer to John's question:

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 (Matthew 11:4b-6).

John wasn't seeing what he expected to see, things weren't turning out the way that expected. So, he wondered, he questioned. The text indicates that he doubted.

Perhaps we've all had a few John the Baptist moments; Both kinds of John the Baptist moments. Moments when we felt God's presence so powerfully, moments when we were so sure, moments when we were so confident of God's presence, of God's reality, of God's power at work in our lives and in the world, that nothing could shake us. Perhaps you've had a John the Baptist moment like that.

But then there's the other kind of John the Baptist moment. Perhaps you've also had a time or times in your life when things just won't working out, just weren't going the way you expected, a time when the "bad guys" seemed to winning, a time when you just couldn't catch a break, a time when God seemed far away and when all of the truths that you were so confident about at one point in your life, seemed to be called into question. A time when you wondered. A time when you doubted. Perhaps you've had a John the Baptist moment like that.

Today, on this Gaudete Sunday, I found something to rejoice in. It's that immediately after John's messengers went away, after asking John's doubt-full question of Jesus, "Are you the one...?" "Should we wait for another?" Jesus turned to the crowd and talked to them about John the Baptist. And his message wasn't about John's doubts or about John's failures. It was about John's importance in the story of the work that God was doing in the world. It was about John's role as a prophet and position as God's messenger. It was about acknowledging the work that John had done, in setting the stage,

in preparing the way. Jesus turned, from hearing about John's doubts, and stated that no one in the kingdom of heaven was greater than John.

And I rejoice in the fact that that is true. That John's questions, that John's doubts, that John's struggles did not negate the work that he had done or, and, of course, the fact that he too, was a chosen one, he too, was a beloved one, he too, was God's treasured servant, loved in all of his fiery faith and in his struggling doubts.

Today is Gaudete Sunday. And so, no matter what kind of John the Baptist moment you're having today, this week, this month, this year, moments of faith or moments of doubt, or a strange and confusing combination of both, rejoice, for God loves you for who you are; for all that you are.

With John the Baptist, we might doubt, we might wonder, and we might even see glimpses of God's glory as we wait for Jesus, the one who has come and who is coming. And so, we pray. "Come, Lord Jesus." Amen.