**December 15, 2019 Matthew 11:2-11**

***BORN the KING: Good News to the Poor***

**Scripture:** *Matthew 11:2-11 NRSV*

(2)When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples (3)and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (4)Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: (5)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. (6)And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (7)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? (8)What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. (9)What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. (10)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.' (11)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.

**Notes:**

1. If the ***Messiah*** doesn’t look the way one thought, is he still the ***Messiah***?
   1. John ***questions*** whether Jesus is the Messiah.
   2. The ***works*** John hears about are acts of ***mercy***.
   3. Jesus ***responds*** to John’s questions.
   4. Jesus ***responds*** to the crowd.
2. This is not ***different*** from our looking for the Messiah.
   1. We ask God to ***bless*** us in very specific ways:
   2. We question where God is in the midst of ***tragedy***.
   3. We often view God on ***our*** ***side*** of conflict.
   4. We need to be looking at acts of ***mercy***.
3. Advent is about ***expectation*** but what are we expecting?
   1. It’s okay to have ***questions***.
   2. ***Embrace*** who Jesus truly is.

**Transcript:**

There is a saying: *the more you know, the more you know you don’t know.* And, I have to agree with this statement. I have learned that the more that I do know the more that I realize what I do not know. That is one of the great things in being a teacher is when you are asked a question; and you do not know the answer, you can say let’s look it up together; or look it up and share what you find with me.

But there is so much we do not know, and yet we do not take the initiative to find out. It makes me think of another saying, “Ignorance is bliss.” This speaks to our arrogance as humans. We often believe in very specific, black and white ways. We do this about many things, while we often want to blame the arrogance of youth, adults are not exempt. Our expectations in life are rarely how it actually goes.

What we believe about certain people is many times proven wrong when we actually get to know them. Even some of our deeply held beliefs are sometimes shaken, when confronted with tragedy; when someone we love travels a different path. Unmet expectations lead to shaky ground and our equilibrium is thrown off. How can what we always believed to be true, possibly be wrong? Have you ever been there? Have you ever had something confront your expectations, or even your belief systems, so drastically that you began to wonder what is true?

That is where John is in this text today. He had these ideas about who the Messiah would be and what he would do. He was anticipating this radical, cataclysmic judgment for those not following God, for those who have oppressed the people of God. We can see this clearly prior to Jesus’s baptism when John references an ax at the root of the trees and says that the trees that don’t bear fruit will be thrown into the fire (Matthew 3:10–12). John was obviously waiting for the ax to fall. Yet here he is in prison. Instead of watching his enemies fall by the ax of God, he now awaits the ax of his own death. So, he doubts. He wonders, “Have I been wrong? Is Jesus really the Messiah?” Turn with me in your bibles as we read our sermon passage from Matthew 11:2-11.

*(2)When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples (3)and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (4)Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: (5)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. (6)And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (7)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? (8)What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. (9)What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. (10)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.' (11)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. (Matthew 11:2-11 NRSV)*

John was the first to recognize the Messiah while still in the womb. Yet here he is, in prison, confused and wondering. If the Messiah doesn’t look the way John thought he would, is he still the Messiah? If Christ isn’t working in my life or in the world the way we expect, is he still Christ?

**John questions whether Jesus is the Messiah.** He heard what Jesus was doing, and it wasn’t what he expected of the Messiah. We see from Matthew 3 that John expected more judgment from the Messiah. This is consistent with what we know most of the Jewish people believed about the Messiah. There were many awaiting a political king. We even know that at the time of Jesus’s birth, the Magi went to Jerusalem seeking him since that was the logical place for a king to be born.

The freedom they desired was from political oppression. We know that there was a great fear of Herod. Herod Antipas was a jealous king who murdered his own family to stay in power. At Jesus’s birth he put out an edict to kill all boys under the age of two, in order to get rid of the threat of a new king. This paranoia is still present since Herod fears the followers of Jesus, and an uprising. Herod also seems to assume that the Messiah is going to come for political rule.

John is sitting on death row in prison. This probably led him to some doubt about who Jesus was. If John was a faithful servant and prophet for the Messiah, why was he sitting in prison? He is there because of his outspoken words against Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife. Again, it seems John’s faithfulness led him to prison.

**The works John hears about are not works of uprising or overthrowing governments, they are acts of mercy.** John is looking for the ax to cut down the unfruitful trees, but instead what he hears are stories about healings. He has heard rumors about the grace-filled works Jesus is performing. This is very different from the political uprisings he expected. The context in Matthew is interesting to explore. After Jesus’s baptism and his temptation in the wilderness are these incredible acts of mercy and healing.

But it is also the location of the Beatitudes. Instead of preaching about uprising and overthrowing governments, Jesus’s words are about loving enemies, being meek, humble, generous. Jesus emphasizes that the peacemakers are the children of God and that the persecuted are blessed.

It’s also important to note that most of Jesus’s preaching in these chapters is not criticism of those in power but words of challenge for those who hear: a reworking of the law and a reconceptualizing of how things are in the kingdom of God. Despite what was believed, the kingdom of God is not about political gain, but about deep heart change that changes the lives of others in real ways. It’s about loving God fully. It’s about loving your neighbor fully. It was very likely that John heard, in addition to the miraculous deeds Jesus did, of this radical way of preaching; actions and preaching that ran counter to what they believed the Messiah would do in establishing a kingdom.

**Jesus responds to John’s questions.** Jesus reemphasizes the acts of mercy he is doing; the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are healed, the dead are raised, and good news is preached to the poor. Jesus views these acts of mercy as proof enough of who he is. Again he is redefining the kingdom of God for John and for each of us who hear his word. It’s not about political gain. It is however, about mercy, healing, and wholeness. It’s important to note too that, after Jesus lists these acts of mercy, he gives another Beatitude:

Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me. This seems to emphasize the fact that his preaching about the kingdom is part of why John is struggling with the identity of Jesus. This is a completely different way of thinking about the kingdom of God. This also emphasizes the offensive and radical nature of what Jesus is doing. Not everyone is going to accept Jesus’s words. Some are going to be offended by them. This is obviously counter to what people thought of the Messiah and counter to who people want to be.

**Jesus responds to the crowd.** The comparison to a reed is likely a direct comparison to Herod Antipas. Herod used an image of a reed on his currency. He would be royalty in soft robes. This continues the theme that while the people think they are looking for political help, that isn’t truly the heart of the matter. They entered the wilderness because that’s where revelation from God has happened for the people. The exodus is a key example of this.

Prophets are often found in the wilderness. They find a prophet, not a king. Prophets speak truth to power, whereas kings benefit from power. Prophets challenge the status quo, whereas kings often create the status quo through control. If they weren’t looking for a king in the wilderness, why are they looking for a king in the Messiah? The system is going to be challenged but not in the ways of the world, just like prophets challenge systems in different ways.

**This is not that different from our looking for the Messiah in the world.** We often expect God to move in the ways we want him to. We ask God to bless us in very specific ways: money, fame, homes, etc. What if God’s blessings look more like the Beatitudes than they do like material wealth? What if it’s not that God isn’t blessing us while he blesses others but that our perspective is wrong?

We question where God is in the midst of tragedy. What if God is trying to show us that he is in the midst of the tragedy, grieving with us? We often view God as being on our side of political opinion. What if, instead, God is asking us to completely reframe our thinking, not around a political system but around the kingdom of God? What if we are looking for political power, while God is asking us to change our hearts and care for our neighbors? When we look for a very specific type of Jesus, we often begin to question if Jesus is the Messiah he says he is.

We need to be looking at acts of mercy. In the ways we find people restored and freed. In the generosity and love toward our neighbors. In the places where resurrection is happening. Advent is about expectation; but what are we expecting? How can we repent of the ways we have constructed a certain view of who Jesus is? How can we ask for eyes to see who Jesus really is and who he is calling us to be? How can we remove some of the distractions in our lives; so we are able to see these acts of mercy and grace, not as disappointment, but as the true fulfillment of the Messiah in our midst?

You are not that far removed from John’s questions. People question who Jesus is all the time; haven’t you? It’s okay to have questions. Jesus didn’t reject John’s questions, and he doesn’t reject yours. But we often need to acknowledge that the more we know, the more we don’t know. Our certainty about who we think Jesus is robs us of our ability to learn and embrace who Jesus is trying to show us he truly is.

This Advent, let’s take time to acknowledge the ways our ground has been shaken, and the ways our expectations have let us down. Learn to have new expectations. Learn to expect that maybe God is doing a new thing; a new thing in ways we may never have thought or imagined. May we seek to be open to the questions that leads us to a new openness of trust in who the Messiah is.