

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

December 11, 2022

Hope Blooms in Doubt

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: December 27, 2022

Last week, we met John the Baptist in the wilderness. His bombastic preaching bulldozed through any illusions we can rest on our birthright, as if we inherit something from God just because. He called all the people to confess. He pushed them to start living a life that matters to God. His preaching crescendo to anticipate a fiery spirit to change the world.

From his birth, John knew his sole purpose was to prepare the way for the messiah. He learned chapter and verse from the prophets before him and would have recognized part of the response you read just minutes ago as we lite the Candle of Joy: “The messiah will strengthen weak hands, open the eyes of the blind, and let the lame leap like deer.” Despite, the poetic language, prophets predict substantive, mortal healing.

Throughout John the Baptist’s entire life, he pointed to the Messiah. Now, he doesn’t appear to be quite so sure of himself or quite so sure of the one for whom he was preparing the way.

Jesus blessed the poor but does not seem to alter their plight. Jesus had not yet pulled out the winnowing fork or thrown the chaff into the unquenchable fire, meaning the unjust still hoarded wealth and held a tight grip on government.

Perhaps Jesus was just biding his time until he did those things, but based on what John was hearing, second thoughts pestered him.

Between meeting John in the desert last week and today, John landed in prison. Whittled down and wounded, John speaks for many of us. He tied his life so closely to Jesus and now wonders if it is all worth it.

Did he believe in some absurd fairytale about transformation?

In the season of waiting and preparing, anticipating joy, the lectionary takes us deep into doubt.

Dear God, there are times when we seem so sure we know you, what you will do, what you want from us, what we can expect, and then you disappoint us. It's kind of tough to sing of joy when we linger in doubt. Come to us now. Let John the Baptist ask our questions. Help us hear the answer given ages ago with the clarity to ignite our hope today. Amen.

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word **by** his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered them, "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."

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? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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.' 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.

When sitting in a classroom or meeting at work, isn't it a relief when the smartest person in the room asks the question nagging within you. You don't need to expose your lack of understanding or doubt. If anything, when the smartest person in the room asks the question, you feel justified.

In our journey to the cradle this advent, we see so many hints of the cross, without a glimpse of an empty tomb. The gospels all link cradle to cross. Is this really the way to redeem the world? In Advent's call to prepare for Jesus' arrival, even today, knowing an empty tomb is not the end, we ask if his version of salvation appeals to us.

In today's gospel story, we met John wallowing the darkness of a prison cell. Like prophets before him, preaching truth proves risky, particularly when aimed at the political powers of the day.

Specifically, John belted out that it was immoral for King Herod to marry his brother's wife. It's one thing to provoke the crowds outside the city walls and quite another to publicly poke his nose into Herod's personal life. The king locked him in prison.

In the first century, prison was merely a weigh station before someone was exonerated, exiled, or executed. Only one of these alternatives seemed likely given the disruption John caused by preaching.

During this bleak moment, John asks, "Are you the one?"

If a faith as strong as John the Baptist's faith is still capable of falling into a doubt, he gives us permission to lean into our doubt as well. It's easy to hold on to faith while wandering

around in the bright light of a spring day. Harder when the walls close in and the night grows long.

We may not languish in a windowless cell. But, each of us may find ourselves confined as surely as if a prison. Living in cycle of debt that rises faster than income. Feeling the weight of anxiety and finding no relief. Grieving a parent's decline, not sure of the right answer, doing so alone and wondering if that predicts what you might encounter. Seeing evil, in all its nasty incarnations, still lurking on the national and international stage, particularly at the expense of the vulnerable.

Can I trust in faith, in my condition, with my concerns, or has faith reached the end of its usefulness? Hard experiences, just like John's prison bars, let such questions fester. Since John asks, this story invites us as well to directly question our savior.

Jesus, who probably shared family reunions and a life-long relationship with this slightly older cousin, did not dismiss his disciples' inquiry. He listened. Took in the doubt without returning any shame.

In effect, Jesus said, "I cannot answer for you, if I am the savior for you to stake your life on. You need to look at the evidence you will see for yourself. Everyone I touch receives healing in the way that transforms their life. My ministry is intimate. Unique to what each person needs."

Jesus simply told John's disciples to go back to the prison and describe what they had seen. The blind see. The lame walk. The poor receive good news.

Jesus' ministry might lack the fireworks of grand scale upheaval, but the grassroots and personal nature, knitting

people together one soul at a time inspires the beloved community to form out of fragments. The kingdom of heaven expands when every member receives the Holy Spirit. God's savior builds God's presence one encounter at a time.

Then Jesus gives John more than requested, "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." He blesses those who stay with him, even when he does not give them what they are looking for or he does not meet their expectations.

Jesus invites us to be unattached to our views and expectations of God. This is the sort of wisdom that guides us in the desert time of waiting: learning to trust while simultaneously letting go.¹

This past week, Leon Logothetis inspired the attendees at Townhall South. This is my first season of the lectures, they are fantastic. For those of you with flexible working and access to babysitters, don't wait to retire for these events. I digress.

Feeling depressed and confined to a broker's desk in London, Leon left. He got up and left. Once he landed in the US, he stood in Times Square and decided to connect with people as he made his way across our country, relying only on kindness. Could he eat and sleep, sustained only by the kindness of strangers?

His story gained national attention – hence the credibility to speak at Townhall South. And forms the basis for a Netflix

¹ Mark Yurs, "Matthew 11:2-11: Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, Ed David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011) 73. Yurs' ideas inspired my exegesis and ability to shape this sermon.

series, *The Kindness Diaries*, showcasing the Good Samaritans along the way who care for him.

In Pittsburgh, he received a meal and warm dry bed from a homeless man. While in India, he marveled at seeing a mother shower love upon her children as they stood in the squalor of a ghetto.

Later, at the luncheon, before others joined us at the table, quite cordial, he was curious about my life. When he learned I too chucked the corporate desk, only my path led to ministry, he was a bit speechless. It goes with the territory, the look when unsuspecting people find out I serve the church. Then I asked him to scan the room, see the members of Westminster, who also worship God.

Then we talked about our dogs, the theatre, and travel as others joined the table. At the end of the lunch, just as he stood to receive questions, I offered my thanks.

He paused, "Maybe I need more time to ask you, but maybe not. No, I'll be direct."

Sometimes the weightiest of all questions come in the fewest words.

His prior trips to India, meeting impoverished people who remained joyful, caused him to wonder if they had some particular insight.

Just as bluntly as he told us to be kind to one another, he told me that he went to India looking for God.

Then his question, "Where do you send people to look for God?"

Where would you send someone? Where do you go?

It's the nagging question all the time, and particularly in Advent, when we are waiting for God to show up.

Literally the clock was ticking as his audience waited.

Since we'd shared a fondness for a musical, *Les Miserable*, I reminded him of Valjean's deathbed song, "to love another person is to see the face of God."

Leon smiled. His world travels, seeing people in all places and of all colors proved this. When we look at others, able to see the divine spark within, see the uniqueness given only by God to them, we glimpse God.

When we collect together all these fiery spirits, God's essence grows more vivid. The word essence resonated with him, since we cannot contain it.

But, we see enough of it to know that more exists.

The man who had just taught us to greet one another with kindness, who got people to hug random strangers in the high school theatre, admitted that he did not need to travel to India to find God. The essence is everywhere.

Later, while working on this sermon, I googled Leon, India, and God. On the darkest night of his life, he penned a suicide note. On the other side of the morning, he got up to look for God.

In the midst of winter, we too face a time of change. Louise Roger's departure, announced earlier this week, causes us to wonder about our ministry, how we will function. In our grief, can we feel joy?

When we consider what she taught us, yes. She pointed to Jesus. She pointed to Jesus and bridged the space between us, teaching us to care for one another. She modeled the one-on-one companionship we can offer each other. Kindness. Strength. Particularly in times of doubt. Can we feel joy? Yes, because of her ministry, we can be the strength to others.

In this bleak season of winter, when the nights are long and the days chip away at whatever confidence we have, if we can still see joy springing up as the love between two people, we can let our doubt fade as we hope in another day, another face of love, and trust the face of our savior will appear as we prepare for him.



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