

The Third Sunday of Advent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
14 December 2025

Matthew 11:2-11

I know someone who is a television producer and he tells me that most actors are not given the entire script of the movie or television show. They are given exactly what they need for their specific scenes. They all have a sense of where the story is going, but they lack all the specifics, the plot twists, the last minute changes to the script, the sudden changes in location, the work that will happen when CGI sound and visual effects are added, and the cuts editors will do before the production is ready to be launched. The actors know the part they play in the show, but nothing more. To see the hole picture, they must wait until opening night and they are often surprised to see the final results.

Today have the same situation occurring in our Gospel story. Matthew gives us a window into John the Baptist's most difficult time of his life. And this moment of darkness is happening on the other side of victory. One moment he was the center of attention and thousands come to seek his wisdom and advice, now he is in a dark cell in Herod's palace. His teachings captivated an entire generation and many saw in him the fulfillment of ancient prophecies, but now he lies awake in the middle of the night filled with doubts and sadness. He had been filled with purpose and a glorious sense of expectation about the fulfillment of God's promises in the Messiah, but now he worries if perhaps he placed his trust on the wrong person. He played his part in the great drama of salvation history, but he now wonders if it was all for nothing. He led thousands into a baptism of repentance but now he wonders if Jesus is the Messiah. He had committed his entire life to God, fully convinced that in Jesus of Nazareth God was about to redeem Israel, but this Jesus had thoroughly disappointed him.

He had heard about the things Jesus was doing and he was concerned. Gripped by anxiety and fear, he sends two of his disciples to question him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John had an idea in his mind about how Messiah should behave. The prophecies had been quite clear that Messiah would usher in a time of vindication and restoration for Israel. This would be a political, spiritual, and social restoration. But so far, Jesus had done nothing to realize the political aspirations of Israel. Rome was still in charge and Jesus did not look like the revolutionary type. John was trying to discern Jesus' identity based on his actions (or lack of political action) but this is only a partial way to look at the identity and mission of the Messiah.

To the messengers from John, Jesus answers, “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.” There is a subtle rebuke in this answer that I want to explore. The passage tells us that John is concerned about what Messiah was doing. Jesus mentions four things that he has been doing which fulfill Isaiah’s prophecies, but he also adds a phrase about what he is preaching.

Two of the results of what he is doing is that the blind receive their sight and the deaf hear. In Isaiah 29:18-19, the prophet announces, “On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll and freed from gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.” Isaiah 35:5-6, the Old Testament passage for today, adds the lame and the mute, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” The last result of the things he is doing is that the dead are raised. Isaiah 26:19 also prophesied this about Messiah, “Your dead shall live; their corpses shall rise. Those who dwell in the dust will awake and shout for joy!” So to summarize Jesus’ answer, “Go tell John that Isaiah’s prophecies are being fulfilled because I am the one he spoke about. The deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk, the mute speak, and the dead are raised to life.”

But there is another element of his mission that doesn’t fall into the categories of works or things he is doing, and this is what he is saying, what he is preaching about, the content of his teachings. Jesus adds this to the message to John. He says, “The poor have good news brought to them.” This fulfills Isaiah 61:1, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.” John’s view of the Messiah is limited. What Messiah is doing worries him, but he should also pay attention to Messiah’s words. In Jesus’ preaching and teaching John should see the fulfillment of the promise that Messiah will bring good news to the poor and the oppressed, the captives and prisoners.

But Jesus adds one last sentence to his message, “Tell John, blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” John has taken offense of Jesus because he fails to understand the totality of God’s plan. John is an important character in the great play of salvation history, but he has only been given the script for his part in the play. The rest of the play remains a mystery to him. He doesn’t know how the play will end: what the results of Jesus’ ministry will be, how he will die, how God will raise him from the dead, how his resurrection will forever change his disciples, how the Holy Spirit will create a new community in the Messiah, and how that

community will change the world forever. John doesn't know and can't imagine how Jesus the Messiah will bridge the gap of separation between humanity and God, conclusively and forever. All he knows is his role and he thinks he knows how things should end. But God had bigger plans, plans that included the whole world and not just Israel, plans that would unfold over many centuries, until the final new creation becomes a reality when Messiah will right all the wrongs of creation at the end of days.

Jesus asks John to believe and not to take offense of him, even if he didn't fully understand how the story of salvation history would end. It is very much like us today. We have no idea about how God will continue to unfold Salvation History. All we know is what we have lived and our current situation but tomorrow remains a mystery to us. Sometimes our efforts appear so puny, so insignificant, so common that we fail to see how God is using us to advance the kingdom. We often become discouraged and are tempted to give up. We just can't see beyond our horizon, and we let our current tribulations obscure God's overarching plan for his creation. We become hopeless and some of us even doubt Christ's promises of a glorious return when he will restore the whole creation back to himself. We doubt God is among us and cares for us because of the pain and suffering in the world. But remember that all we see is our partial and limited view of our lives. Only God can see the whole canvass of life. We must trust that his plans for humanity are being realized and one day will come to their God-intended conclusion.

Like John, we have expectations of Jesus the Messiah. We have heard his stories preached thousands of times, we have read the scriptures and have an image of what he looks like in our brains, and in many ways, we have created a Jesus that suits our needs and insecurities. Some of us have made Jesus into a liberal Democrat, or into a flag waving Christian nationalist, or into a compassionate Republican, or even into a non-political pacifist. But, like John, our view of Messiah is only partial and limited. His identity and vocation defy our clearly constructed expectations. Be careful not to take offense of him because he doesn't fit into the beautifully constructed crystal box you have created for him.

Today, as we celebrate one more week of preparation for the coming of the infant Jesus, let us pray for patience and endurance. May God give us the faith to see in the darkness, even if we don't know where we are going. May we have the courage to play our part in God's divine plan with enthusiasm and joy, even if we don't know the rest of the story. May we learn to see God's love permeating every inch of our lives. He who is eternally mysterious is also very near to us. Let us trust and not be discouraged. Our vindication is near and Messiah is on the way. May he continue to bless us, Amen!