

**Matthew 11:2-11** When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples <sup>3</sup> to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” <sup>4</sup> Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. <sup>6</sup> Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.” <sup>7</sup> As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? <sup>8</sup> If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. <sup>9</sup> Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> This is the one about whom it is written: “‘I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you.’” <sup>11</sup> Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

How do you address questions about your faith?

1. John was willing to suffer for the truth
2. Jesus directed him to God’s Word

We are in the midst of the world’s mad rush towards Christmas. In the midst of all the marketing, all the extra events, both secular and sacred, from parties to advent services, this Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, stands out different.

You may have noticed that the gospel reading isn’t about Mary and Joseph, nor the times before the birth of Jesus. It isn’t about angels, or wise men. The reading tells of a scene from the middle of Jesus’ life, and the question of John the Baptist. And there’s the Advent connection. John is the ultimate Advent figure, the forerunner of the Messiah, the one who proclaimed the Advent of the Christ. But here we see him with questions about faith. Let’s learn from John and Jesus this morning how to address question about faith.

Let’s set the stage. John was in prison for the truth. During his ministry in the wilderness, John confronted Herod about his marriage. Herod had divorced his wife and married his brother’s wife. John called Herod out about it. He told him that this was an adulterous relationship condemned by God’s holy law. Herod responded by throwing John in prison. He was held in the fortress of Machaerus for many months.

John was no twinkie. As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? <sup>8</sup> If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. John was a rare man, an unusual man. He dressed weird and he lived alone. Maybe he even smelled a little bit too much like camel. But people came to the desert to hear him preach. Why? Not because his sermons were racy. Not because of the great choirs and old favorite hymns. Not because they wanted to see some old friends. Not because it was just a habit for an hour a week. They didn’t go to be tantalized, entertained, or get the latest “how to” to happiness. They came because they wanted to hear the authentic Word of God and they knew that is what John would give them.

Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. John was no cream puff who could be pushed around. He didn’t stick his finger in the wind of opinion to see which way it blew. John was solid. John was a prophet but, more than that, he was also the fulfillment of prophecy. He is the only prophet who’s coming was foretold in Scripture. This is the one about whom it is written: “‘I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you.’”

And let’s make no mistake, John knew exactly who Jesus was. The Apostle John, who was at first a disciple of John the Baptist recalled, “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup> This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” <sup>31</sup> I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” (John 1:29-31) John knew who Jesus was, where he had come from and what he would do: take away the sins of the world. He also understood that his role was simply to point people to Jesus.

And Jesus called that greatness.

It’s usually around this time of the year that Time Magazine would come out with their Person of the Year. The Person of the Year was the person they felt had the biggest impact on our world in the last twelve months. The Person of the Year has been presidents, dictators and founders of tech companies. Does Time Magazine still do that? Does Time Magazine still even exist? Does anybody read it? Anyway, who would you pick for Person of the Year this year? Who would you see is really great? How do you measure greatness?

Where do we find greatness? Jesus says it’s in being the least. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. John was great because he humbly let himself become less so that Jesus could become more. John was

great because he was in prison for the Word of God. Who is great? Whoever is less than that. Jesus was less than that. Jesus, too, was put in prison. But Jesus went lower than that. He placed himself beneath the entire human race, dying on the cross to take away all of our sins. There you see greatness. Jesus humbled himself for this world of sinners. Greatness is not found in how much money you make or how many people work for you or how big of a house you have. Greatness in the kingdom of God is measured in humble service to others, in putting others before ourselves.

John was the greatest prophet who knew very well who Jesus was. But then we read, *When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples<sup>3</sup> to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"* Doesn't it surprise you to hear John say that? Did John really have to ask? Did John really doubt that Jesus was the one? If he did, what shook that strong confidence? What rocked his faith?

First, look at where he was. He was in prison, specifically, the stronghold of Machaerus near the Dead Sea. C. H. Spurgeon said, "Dark thoughts may come to the bravest when pent up in a narrow cell." Perhaps, he began to wonder why Jesus had done nothing to get him out. John had sacrificed his whole life for the kingdom of God. He toiled, prayed, denied himself pleasures, and suffered for the kingdom. What was Jesus doing? Eating and drinking with all kinds of people while John languished in prison.

Another problem was Jesus' message. John had said about him, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."<sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:16-17) Perhaps John wondered, "Where's the fire? Where's the judgment? Where's the power?"

There's something else. John used a word that indicates a different kind of person. He didn't ask, "Is there another Messiah?" He asked, "Are we waiting for another kind of one?" Some Jews at that time taught that there would be two Messiahs. They couldn't reconcile the prophecies of the Old Testament that spoke about the suffering of the Messiah, like Isaiah 53, with the other prophecies of the Messiah as a great King, such as Psalm 2. So some believed there would be two different Messiahs. That may be where John was going with this. He may have been thinking, "I see you taking away the sins of the world, but not the judgment of the world, so are we waiting for a different one?"

How did Jesus answer that? *Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.* All of the things that Jesus points to is what was prophesied in the Isaiah lesson we read earlier. In other words, Jesus directs John to the Scripture and compares what Jesus is doing with Scripture. That is the answer to all our doubts. Get into God's Word. If you still have doubts, you need to study Scripture more.

Even with an understanding of Scripture, we can struggle with Jesus. *Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.* The thing that trips people up more than anything is Jesus' lowliness and cross. His cross makes us swallow our pride. His cross points to the damning nature of our sin. His cross shows how impotent we are to save ourselves. We don't like that. We expect more from Jesus. But if we expect Jesus to pat us on the back and tell us how good we are, we will doubt he is the One. If we expect Jesus to rain down judgment on people and he doesn't, we may doubt he is God. If we expect Jesus to make our lives wonderful and he doesn't, we may doubt his love. *Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.* Blessed we are if we can still cling to Jesus in faith even when Satan attacks us with doubts.

Dear friends, when you have doubts about God's love for you, do what John did. Go straight to Christ! And what will He say to you – to you who are poor in spirit, who have nothing to offer God but sin, fears, doubts, and tears? He will say, "Come, look into the manger. What do you *see*, when you look into the manger? You see God's love, because you see God Himself taking on your human flesh. You see God's Son, who has come into this world not to condemn and curse you, but to bless you, to forgive your sins, and to give you heaven. This is the Gospel preached to the poor. This is the Gospel preached to you! Jesus says to you, "Oh, do not fall away on account of me! Rather, blessed are you, because you listen to me!

In the midst of this busy season let's make every effort to go to Jesus in his Word and listen to him. May his lowliness not offend us but may we see in the manger and the cross his great love for you. And may that Word answer any doubts you may have.