

Sermon for Advent 3 - Matthew 11:2-10

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

“Now when John [the Baptizer] heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ...” John the Baptizer was in prison. Why was he in prison? The Gospels tell us that he spoke against Herod, the king of Judah. John told Herod that it was unlawful for Herod to have his brother’s wife as his wife. This is adultery. As it ended up, John would lose his life over this matter by beheading, but for the time being, he was in prison.

John spoke correctly: Herod had committed adultery. Having relations with anyone in thoughts, words, or deeds who is not your wife or husband breaks the 6th commandment. John did the right thing, and yet, there he sat, chained up in prison. Time was undoubtedly an abundant commodity for John, and his thoughts likely got the best of him: worries, fears, doubts. John had proclaimed of Jesus “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Christ preached that all men are sinners and pointed to Himself as the Forgiver of all Sinners. John preached the same message: the law and Gospel. So why was he suffering in prison for this truth? Was he preaching in vain? Could he not renounce the truth and live freely? Why doesn’t the Messiah come like a mighty king and rescue him? Was Jesus really the Christ? John’s circumstances screamed otherwise. But he had to know, so he sent word to ask: “Are you One who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

For us and all Christians, telling the truth, speaking the law, or the word Pr. Arnold used last week: admonishing, has its consequences. And these consequences are not insignificant. We’ve had strained family relationships. We’ve lost the respect of others. Do we not also question: is God there? Why won’t He fix my problems? Why don’t I see His power and His might? Is His Word trustworthy? Would it not be easier to walk in the ways of worldly wisdom and broadmindedness? Is Jesus enough? Do we not also ask our Lord: “Are you the One to come or should we look for another?”

How does Jesus answer John’s inquiry? What does He say? “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” When the news got back to John, perhaps he thinks, “All good and well! Blind people see, cripples walk, diseases are healed, deaf people hear and the dead are raised. The poor have good news preached to them. Good for them. But I sit in prison.”

But do you remember? Jesus had on last bit of news for John, and good news at that. Something that applied directly to him:

“And blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.”

Though John felt cursed, being chained in prison, Jesus declared him blest. John was not offended by the Christ and His Word of truth. John was in prison to be sure, and these would be the last earthly walls in which he would live. But John was truly free by the Word of Christ. Herod walked about freely in his palace, but could not be more shackled by God’s condemning law, living out his days in his own self-made prison. But John was completely freed by the Word of God. Why?

Isaiah said it best: “All flesh is grass and all its beauty like the flower of the field ... surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”

Jesus asked the crowds what they went out to the wilderness to see when they went to see John. A reed shaken by the wind? Hardly. A man dressed in soft clothing, living in a king’s house? Not even close. They went to see a prophet. And what is a prophet? A prophet speaks the important message of another, a message not originating in himself. He is a messenger sent to prepare the way. And for the prophet John the Baptizer, the message had fully encapsulated his life: He was blind and deaf to the world’s wisdom and would not walk her broad and easy path. His sins, more devastating than leprosy, were cleansed by the Lamb of God who washed them all away in His Blood. Though left for dead in prison, God raised him to new life by the Good News of forgiveness preached to him by Christ.

“To prepare” means to get the way ready so that whatever interferes with the course of travel, be it fallen trees or stones, is removed. So what was it that blocked the way of Christ that John was to remove? Sin and doubt. And the way is prepared for you. Christ removes your sin and doubt.

And even more than that: Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The same resurrection of Jesus is yours in Holy Baptism. This same cleansing is restored to you again and again in the Supper. Here your sins are forgiven. And though your experiences of hardship and pain in clinging to God’s Word teach you otherwise, this truth stands: you are forgiven by Christ. Be unoffended by Him and His Word for you. Let that Word dwell in you richly because you too are truly free. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠