

Sermon Notes December 11th, 2022

Scripture: Matthew 11:2-11 NRSVUE

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, those with a skin disease 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.”

Jesus Praises John the Baptist

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.

Sermon

This morning, we are in the eleventh chapter of Matthew and John the Baptist makes another appearance. Last week, we walked with him in Matthew three, as we heard his powerful teaching and setting the stage for Jesus.

In chapter eleven, we learn that John is in prison. However, Matthew does not go into any details. Thus, we do not know how long he has been in prison or what has landed him there. While in prison, John hears of the activities of Jesus. We are not sure what is exactly happening with John, but we do know one thing. John still has disciples of his own and he sends them to Jesus with the following question:

Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?

In our bible study on Tuesday, we explored the following two questions as it related to John’s question.

Question One: Is it possible that prison life has eroded John’s faith?

Question Two: Could he be asking this question for the sake of his disciples?

I think that both of these scenarios have fascinating possibilities. Without Matthew giving us direct answers, we as readers, are left to wondering. There are many that believe John was seeking confirmation that Jesus was definitely the messiah. This could be because the reports that John were hearing did not match up with his expectations of Jesus.

Last week, John was telling the followers the following:

“As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

However, in the ministry of Jesus and his words and response to John’s disciples seem to be showing us is that the revolution of Jesus is neither violent or vengeful. I imagine that John was hoping for at least a prison break; right?

When we take a look at John’s own ministry, we see that his ministry carried a healthy dose of judgment. His ministry and life were rooted out of Malachi 3. Take a look at the first part of the chapter this week. John’s purpose was to refine and purify the people. However, Jesus ministry was almost a complete one-eighty. In contrast, the ministry of Jesus was heavy on healing and restoration and light on judgment and vindication.

But, we can't be too hard on John, can we? I think that we are in same boat. We ask the same type of questions that John asked. We look around our lives and the world that we live in and we ask, "if Jesus is really the one who brings God's rule to fruition, why is our world still marked by exploration, injustice, polarization and violence. Maybe the answer that we can cling to is the answer that Jesus gave to John's disciples:

Jesus told them, "Go back and tell John what's going on:

The blind see,
Lepers are cleansed,
The dead are raised,
learn that God is on their side.

The lame walk,
The deaf hear,
The wretched of the earth

I really wrestled with this text this week. It has been one of the toughest for me to write in a very long time. In the end, not that I am near the end of the sermon, I think it is because I kept coming back to the thought that John and Jesus viewed ministry differently. In God's coming, it brought both judgment and redemption. Then each one of them encountered leaders and followers who both welcomed and opposed what was happening.

John's disciples left Jesus to go back to John and report to him everything that they had witnessed. They were following the instructions of Jesus when Jesus said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see."

I think that the hearing and the seeing takes us back to John's original message of repentance and renewal.

In the beginning of the sermon, I mentioned that there were two possibilities. John could have been doubting and he wanted to have reassurance and that is what we have spent time exploring. However, the other angle could be that John was sending his disciples out to see for themselves and to be encouraged.

I truly believe that is what was occurring. I believe John's faith was not wavering and that it was even growing stronger. He could have known that his time on the earth was about to come to an end with an execution about to take place. He wanted to make sure that his disciples saw and heard from Jesus firsthand.

Maybe it is a stretch. But, I see his followers coming back and sharing the great news with John. I hear John sharing with them that this is what I have been telling you and now you have experienced it firsthand.

He is the Messiah. It is time to be part of this great kingdom movement.

So, what do we do with this text?

We are living in the in-between. The Messiah came and the Messiah will come again. In this in-between time, we experience joy and hope and our lives are transformed by the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

God continues to be at work in the world and in our own lives. It is not easy but just as we heard in Isaiah today, our personal deserts can be transformed into gardens overflowing with joy. The promise that Jesus proclaimed about the poor transcends to us, the poor sinner trapped by their own sin. Jesus continues to give us sight and insight and continues to open our ears and cleans us.

We are still early in Year a, so let me remind you that this year, I am preaching through the Faith Practices. One of the faith practices is encourage. As Christians, we need to make sure that we are encouraging one another and lifting each other up so we can survive in this world.

I think in our society, discouragement has been placed on the front burner and it has been turned on high. I think that this comes in various forms as well.

Individuals have become discouraged because there is dissatisfaction with the past. Folks have been tempted to throw in the towel because they have a distaste for the present. Then, there is severe distrust of the future. When these things are combined together, it results in blindness.

If we, as individuals or as churches, have nothing to rely on, or we forget our blessing and look to our circumstances, then that is when discouragement begins to take hold. Instead, what we need is encouragement. As a church, I believe that we need hope and peace and the knowledge that the Lord knows our troubles. That is part of the Advent season; right? Let me give you some specific encouragement in the following sentence: God has great concern and compassion for us and is not leaving us unloved or uncared for.

Later this morning, we are going to go into the fellowship hall and have a meal. I encourage you to use this time for fellowship. I want to challenge you to use this time to give encouragement to those who are at your table. There are many who are dealing with discouragement.

The terrible aspect about discouragement is that it is a thief. It will steal your zeal, your peace, your joy, and your contentment. If discouragement dwells long with you, its friends will soon join. In case you are unaware, some of discouragements friends' names include: fatigue, hopelessness, despair, self-pity, depression, doubt, and bitterness.

Following the meal, we as a church will have time to talk more about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that are knocking on the door of Bay View. Town Hall II is not going to be the end. It is a process. The last twenty-months at Bay View has opened my eyes to how the church is living into discouragement and despair.

The last few years have been very difficult. I wish I had the magic wand to wave and everything would be perfect. But, it is a process and sometimes, a messy process. But, we can get through the process and we can and will do it together.

We do not have to live in a world of hurt and doubt. We don't have to live alone. We are a community. Thus, individuals don't have to weep in solitude. The body of Christ should be lifting everyone up. Remember, we have the Holy Spirit indwelling in you who warms your soul, my soul and our soul collectively.

You have the God of encouragement waiting to show you His mercy and love.

May we continue to be on this journey together and let us hold onto the words of Jesus that come later in chapter eleven:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest," (Matthew 11:28).

AMEN