

Year A Advent 3 John questions Jesus about being the Messiah Matt 11 2 to 11

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy (Is.35:5-6a). The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...[God] has sent me to announce good news to the poor (Is. 61:1).

These are some of the prophecies of Isaiah, spoken about the one whom God would send to save the world. We hear most of those twice today – in Isaiah and in the Gospel. Why were Isaiah's prophecies in our Gospel today? I'm glad you asked. First, let's set the scene.

John the Baptist has landed himself in prison. He was outspoken and, when you're criticizing King Herod for marrying his brother's former wife, the king doesn't take kindly to that. King Herod was worried that John's criticism of him would raise up the people against him because the people supported John – they knew John was, at the least, a prophet, and some even thought John was the promised Messiah. John had been openly criticizing the religious leaders too. Last week we heard him call them a "brood of vipers" when they came to him to be baptized. So, when Herod decided to arrest John, they didn't stick up for him. They didn't want to get on the bad side of a king working for the Romans who could throw them in prison too. So, there John was...isolated from nearly all of his followers, and at the end of his ministry. But, he wants to know that the end of his ministry isn't the end of everything. John's life – from beginning to end – has been focused on being God's messenger, on proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom and of the one who would make that happen. As he faces execution, John needs to know he hasn't

been wasting his time. He needs to know he is right about Jesus being the long-expected Messiah.

Needless to say, John has high expectations for Jesus...All four Gospels tell us that John the Baptist is the voice of the one in the wilderness crying, "Make straight the way for the Lord." This was earth shattering news. A lot of us maybe don't realize just how earth shattering it was. "Make straight the way for the Lord – These are more words from the prophet Isaiah. More than six hundred years earlier, Isaiah had told everybody that, one day, there would be someone – a voice in the wilderness – crying out, "Make straight the way for the Lord." (Is.40:3). Of course, Isaiah spoke Hebrew and the word he used was not "Lord." The word Isaiah spoke in his prophecy was "Yahweh" – GOD. "Make straight the way for God." John the Baptist was proclaiming the arrival of God. That created a stir...God's people had been waiting for this day for hundreds of years...They prayed for it...They longed for it...and it was finally here. John wasn't announcing the arrival of just any old Messiah. God was coming in the flesh to save them. When John pointed to Jesus and said to the people, "Look, there he is...the one I told you about", John was pointing at God. So, when I say that John had high expectations of Jesus...he had REALLY high expectations of Jesus. And so did everyone else who heard John using Isaiah's words to announce Jesus.

But, were they wrong? Was John wrong? John knew Jesus was the Messiah on the day of Jesus' baptism because of the promptings of the Holy Spirit. John was told that the one on whom the Spirit alights and stays is the Messiah of God. And then John witnessed that for himself. But the Spirit did not control John's every waking thought and doubts were creeping in. Based on the Scriptures John knew and

loved dearly, John had it in his head what the “Messiah” was going to be and do and the real Messiah wasn’t measuring up to John’s expectations. The Messiah was supposed to be a king from the line of David. He was supposed to be overthrowing the oppressive government, destroying all of the wicked off the face of the earth...Jesus wasn’t doing this. This isn’t what John had expected. Was Jesus the Messiah after all? John had to know for sure. And so, he sent a few of his disciples to confront Jesus.

“Jesus, are you the one?” they ask. Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” Jesus could have simply said, “Yes” and sent them back to John but “Yes” isn’t always good enough. You may, for example, ask me if I am a good driver. I will answer, “Yes,” of course. I’ve always made it to church without any accidents, haven’t I? But, really, telling you I’m a good driver could just be my opinion. Perhaps I’ve had loads of close calls on the way to church and other drivers were good at getting out of my way. Until you’ve actually been in a car with me driving, maybe you don’t really know...maybe you doubt my “Yes.”

So Jesus doesn’t simply say “Yes.” He says, “Look around...See what’s happening...Decide for yourself.” Jesus said, “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.”

John wasn’t seeing what he was expecting – he’d been preaching about the one who was going to baptize with fire. John expected immediate results – he wanted the earthquakes and the fire and the sudden overthrowing of worldly powers. What he got was unexpected. What he got was in Scripture too – we heard it from Isaiah. What John was witnessing was the first arrival of God in the flesh,

coming to give the world the most precious gift ever – the gift of himself, teaching us, showing us how to live. Jesus was patiently and lovingly transforming the world one life at a time.

By the time Matthew wrote this story into his Gospel, John the Baptist had been dead for decades. So Matthew wasn't making a point to John. He was making a point to his readers – to us. John had asked Jesus, "Are you the one?" This is a question that has been asked hundreds of times over – likely by many of us here... "Jesus, are you the one or should we be waiting for another?"

God didn't come on the scene like John was expecting and God very often doesn't enter *our* lives the way *we* are expecting. American preacher, Frank Logue says, "We have the same problem as John. Jesus still doesn't meet our expectations. John preached straighten up right now because the Messiah is coming to bring the smack down. Then Jesus came and did far less than John anticipated. Our problem is more likely the opposite of John the Baptist's problem" he points out. "John expected much more of the Messiah. We often expect little or nothing."

God cannot simply and suddenly make the world a perfect place because the hearts and minds of the people would not be changed. Everyone must choose to love God, must choose to follow God's ways. Just like John, our hopes will be dashed if we are hoping for fire and earthquakes and the sudden overthrow of all worldly powers bringing the perfection of God's kingdom. This perfection would not last – the first lie would be told, the first item would be stolen, the first person would be murdered, and soon we would be right back here where we are today. *People* must change...people must choose love and life in God's kingdom.

Jesus showed us what that looked like...the healings, the inclusion, the freedom of God's perfect love. He gave people the kingdom and invited them into it with him. As Christ's body, we continue showing people the kingdom and inviting them into it with us. Jesus gives us that same answer he gave to John. "Look around." Jesus is still transforming the world, patiently and lovingly, one life at a time. The same answer that Jesus gave to us is now the answer we give to the world: "Look around." The kingdom is being revealed, the kingdom is being lived: In the gifts we provide to a mother and her children at the Women in Crisis Centre...in the food we give to the food bank...in young activists like Greta Thunberg and, closer to home, Autumn Peltier on Manitoulin Island. The work of transforming the world fully into God's kingdom is nowhere near being done but it *is* being done.

Now, because we are the body of Christ working with God in the world to hasten the perfection of the kingdom does not mean that we, ourselves, are perfect at the moment. Our hearts and minds are changing too...transforming as we learn to love God and to follow God's ways more and more closely. Our worship together is a big part of this ongoing transformation. Each time we gather we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven." We pray for the coming perfection but those words also tell us that somewhere – known as "heaven" God's will and God's kingdom are perfect already. The Book of Revelation shows us this other place known as "heaven" where the saints of God are, right now, joyously, exultantly worshiping. The Book of Revelation wants the us to realize that the hymns they are singing in heaven as they worship, the prayers they are praying, the creeds they are confessing are the very same hymns, prayers, and creeds that we the church use on earth. When we say, "...with all your saints who have served you in every age, we give thanks and raise our voices to proclaim the

glory of your name” and sing together, “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might”, Revelation tells us that the church victorious in heaven sings harmony on that very same hymn. This is the communion of the saints in its most dramatic form, Tom Long tells us, and it is a concept that should shake the barnacles off our bland and timid worship. Right now in heaven, he reminds us, there is a fantastic, celebrative, unending party of praise and thanksgiving taking place, and, from time to time, the floor of heaven opens and the party descends into historical time and place – and we call this Sunday worship.”

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” is how Isaiah introduces to us the Messiah and what he will do (Is.61:1). “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” is how Jesus introduces himself and his ministry to his hometown crowd in Nazareth. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” is our introduction to the world as well. Each and every baptized member of Christ’s body bears the gift of the Spirit. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” are words you are going to see each week on your Sunday bulletin in 2023 because those are the words chosen by Archbishop Anne to be our motto for the year ahead. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” We may question and be questioned: Jesus, are you the one? But, with the power of the Spirit working around us and in us, we also have the answer: “Look around.”