

Sermon for December 11, 2016 – “Are You the One...?”

Third Sunday of Advent, Year A – Texts: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

What happens when our expectations aren't met? How about when it's our expectations about God that aren't met? I was recently reminded about something that happened on November 28, back in 2010. After a game against the Pittsburgh Steelers, Steve Johnson, a wide receiver for the Buffalo Bills, voiced his surprise on Twitter when things didn't turn out the way he hoped during the game. It wasn't his own hands, or the Pittsburgh secondary, that foiled his attempt at hauling in what should've been the game-winning TD catch in the end zone. It was God. Johnson had a perfect pass in his hands that would've given his team an overtime victory over the heavily favored Steelers. Instead of walking off the field the hero, however, he dropped it. Devastated, the then 24-year-old watched in horror as the Steelers drove back down the field for the game-winning field goal. While he seemed to hold it together on the sidelines, the New York Daily News reported that at about 5:15 Johnson tweeted this: “I praise you 24/7!!! And this how you do me!!!” “You expect me to learn from this???” “How???” “I'll never forget this!!! Ever!!! Thanks tho!!!” Now, if your theology says that praising God causes him to reward you by favoring your football team, what happens if you drop the ball? Maybe Johnson should just be commended for the honesty of his prayer, for being in communication with God about his questions and doubts. Maybe his expectations of God weren't met. Maybe God wasn't keeping His end of His deal with Steve Johnson's deal, maybe Steve Johnson's world had just shrunk with God operating outside the box Johnson had tried to fit God into. Maybe Steeler safety Troy Polamalu's prayers were better than Johnsons, or maybe it's just that God really is a Steelers fan.

In this morning's gospel reading it sounds as if John the Baptist may've had similar issues with Jesus. In any case, John's world had certainly shrunk...Literally. The one who was preparing a way in the wide-open wilderness is held captive in a small, dank prison cell. The one who baptized the Son of God in the Jordan River is dependent on his jailor to bring him a cup of cold water to drink. The one who was so sure of who Jesus was now wonders, “**Are You the One who is to come?**” Really? Matthew writes, “When John heard what Jesus [the Messiah] was doing...” Actually, what Matthew could've written is, “When John heard what the Messiah was **not** doing ...” You see, Jesus wasn't following John's outline for His ministry. Jesus wasn't following John's mission statement for Him, his step-by-step plan for successful Messianic ministry.

As we heard last week, John had told people the axe was lying at the root, ready to chop down the unworthy trees. He'd promised the chaff would burn with unquenchable fire. But Jesus didn't seem to be pointing the finger of judgment. And doggone it, there was no smoldering woodpile of sinners. All this must have meant more than mild disappointment for John, he was at that very moment sitting in prison awaiting his own beheading because he'd dared to stand up and challenge King Herod for Herod's unrighteous marriage. If Jesus were looking for some chaff worthy of burning He could start by lighting a match to King Herod...and get John out of prison. Instead, Jesus is pronouncing forgiveness, healing the sick, bringing Good News to the poor. Was this **really** what Jesus was **supposed** to be doing? “**Are You the One who is to come...or are we to wait for another?**”

Sometimes Jesus said and did some strange things, or certainly unexpected things, or things that weren't what people were hoping for. Remember, they had this image of someone like King David, someone with a sword in His hand, someone who'd give those nasty Romans what for and send them packing! And because of that, because Jesus was **not** that, because Jesus doesn't meet their expectations...The question is asked. It's asked by John...His disciples...And us...

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

Each of us has expectations about the kind of Savior we want. Some want a fire-and-brimstone breathing Messiah, One who points out where everyone else is going wrong, One who will smite our enemies. Some of us want a Jesus who'll champion our favorite cause, One who'll assure us that God's on our side. Or maybe we want a gentle shepherd who won't demand anything of us. One who really didn't mean what He said about picking up our cross. One who will only assure us that He loves us.

Here's the problem...Sooner or later, our **ideas** of Jesus are going to conflict with the **real** Jesus, what He's really all about and what He's really up to. Now, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but guess what? At some point, Jesus, The real Jesus, The real Messiah, The real Lord of Creation, The real Shepherd, The real Savior, The real Redeemer – is actually going to show up and **really** upset our expectations. John wondered if Jesus was really the one in whom he should hope. So, being in prison, he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask. And it's important to note that John went to the source instead of just muddling along, making assumptions or remaining in the dark about who Jesus is. We're invited to do the same. We're invited to go to Jesus with our questions, concerns, our wondering. We're invited to take part in the ways Jesus has given to His church to know Him better. We're invited to be a part of a community of faith, a church family. We're invited to study the bible with others who have questions. We're invited to pray and spend some quality time with Him. We're invited to be a part in church leadership and church activities. We're invited to worship weekly and take communion. We're invited to praise Him, even when we drop the ball.

Maybe Jesus wasn't exactly what John was expecting. Jesus brought fire all right, but it was the fire of the Holy Spirit. He sought out sinners, and forgave them. He really let the unworthy have it, but what He let them have was grace...Grace upon grace.

You know, doubt is nothing new. It's as old as humanity. Even the most faithful disciples have experienced their dark nights of the soul and their seasons of doubt. Think about Thomas and Paul, Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, the countless other pillars of faith who wrestled with doubt, lived with it, and expressed it, yet did not let it consume them. As Frederick Buechner said, “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” John the Baptist didn't choose to wallow in his doubt, nor did he let it sour or disillusion him, at least not according to Matthew's account. He sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him directly. And the answer they took back to John? It was as clear as a kindergartner's show and tell experience. **“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.”** Jesus meets John's questioning and doubt directly. There are no heavy theological treatises, no condemnation of his doubt. Not one bit! Jesus provides the answer through the witness of His disciples.

During this season of waiting, anticipation, and expectation there's something we would do well to remember, and it's that not everyone shares our enthusiasm for Christmas, much less Advent. Many doubt. Many don't believe at all. Think about it. Why would any reasonable, rational person believe that a tiny, helpless baby could be Savior of the world? In their eyes Santa Claus has more credibility than Jesus Christ. Ah, but we know who the better gift-giver is, even a gift as cool as a pony pales compared to the gift of eternal life!

But, how can they **know** if no one **tells** them? How can they **see** if no one **shows** them? It's so much easier to keep Christmas within the walls of our church as we light our candles and sing our beloved hymns. Isn't it? It's more comfortable to practice our time-honored traditions, the ones we hold near and dear while the world around us continues to turn. A world filled with despair and disbelief, stumbling in the darkness.

And so, here's the thing...The call to us now is the same as it was to John, and to the weary, exiled Israelites to whom Isaiah prophesied. We're called to be agents of this Advent, Stewards of this Good News. We must, and I can't stress this enough, become **active** participants in ushering in God's righteous reign. We're charged with telling the world that something **new** is happening just as the prophet did so long ago. **"Strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble knees,"** Isaiah wrote. **"Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! 'Here is your God!"**

Here is our God? Wait, you mean the baby? In the stable with all those smelly animals? In that filthy manger? That baby? **Yep – that baby! Here is our God!!!**

"Strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble knees... "Be strong, do not fear!" These words are for our time, too. Certainly, the season calls for us to wait in joyful expectation, of that there's no doubt. But, we're can't just sit around twiddling our thumbs. There's too much to do. We're called to go into the world and let people know about the One for whom we wait and that He loves them with a love unlike anything they've ever experienced, that there's hope they never dreamed of hoping for, that there's a place in His coming kingdom for them. Even as we wait, even now, salvation is happening. God is active in the world. What good news – go and tell! Better yet, show and tell!

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen and amen.