

# "An Advent Blessing"

Matthew 11:2-6

December 12, 2010

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday In Advent

What if he was wrong? That may have been going through the mind of John the Baptist as he sat in his prison cell. What if he was wrong about Jesus of Nazareth? John had had his “mountain top experience” when he baptized his cousin, Jesus. He heard the Father speak from heaven. He saw the Holy Spirit descend in the form of a dove. Believing that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah was easy.

John spent his adult life calling people to repentance and faith. The Messiah was coming. He would establish the Kingdom of God. There would be a day of reckoning. There would be a fiery judgment. Evil men would be cast down. Righteousness and holiness would prevail. Jesus, John had said, was this Messiah.

Now John sat in prison. It didn't look very much like the kingdom of God from his point of view. Not only had there not been any judgment, but evil, rather than righteousness, was still in control. So, we read in our Gospel lesson for this morning, “When John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

Maybe you can relate to the frustration and doubt of John. You probably had some sort of “mountain top” religious experience. Maybe it was your simple child-like faith when you were young and went to Sunday School. Maybe it was your confirmation day. Maybe it was when you came to faith as an adult when you heard the Word of God. You were on fire. Believing in Jesus as your Savior was easy.

You've spent your life as a faithful Christian and church member. You've tried pointing people to faith in Jesus Christ. You've tried encouraging inactive members to return to faithful discipleship.

You knew it was important. There was going to be a day of judgment. Evil would be done away with and everything would be put right again.

Now look around at this point in your life. You may not be sitting in prison, but is life going along as smoothly and comfortably as you would like? It doesn't look like the Kingdom of God is alive and thriving. Evil prevails in our society in so many ways. Righteousness and holiness seem to be in short supply. Have you ever been tempted to ask a question like John's – "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Is Jesus the one? Is He the answer to life's problems? Is he the hope for the future? Or should we look for someone else to give us the answer and provide hope? There are plenty of religious fads which purport to give us answers. President Obama, Oprah, and others stand ready to offer us hope.

When Jesus was asked the question by John through his disciples, Jesus didn't blink an eye. He didn't get into a theological discussion with them. He didn't try to argue the point. Jesus simply said, "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."

You may think that Jesus is not answering the question or that he is even avoiding the question. But he isn't. Is Jesus the Messiah? Is He the one who was to come to bring in the Kingdom of God? To those questions, Jesus is giving an enthusiastic and unqualified, "YES!"

In case you are wondering, you didn't miss the word, "yes", in Jesus' answer. He didn't use it, but he meant it. In our Old Testament lesson for today, Isaiah is talking about the coming of the Messiah. He says, "Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.'" When the Messiah, God incarnate, would come, Isaiah says, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy." Now you may understand Jesus' answer better. Jesus is saying, "Look around at what

I'm doing. What the prophets said the Messiah would do, that is what I am doing. You connect the dots."

But Jesus is doing more than saying "Yes, I am the Messiah." His last line seems a bit odd. He says, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." Why would anyone be offended by Jesus? It's not *what* He was doing (being the Messiah) but *how* He was doing it. "Jesus' words invite John to accept in faith the strangest of all paradoxes in the history of the world. The reign of God has broken into history in the person of Jesus, and he is the Coming One. But the power of evil men remains strong, and Christ will not overcome that evil – yet." (Gibbs, p.557)

The Kingdom of God would not be established by merely dealing with the symptoms of sin – diseases and maladies of various sorts. Nor would evil be overcome that easily. The reign of God would enter the world through the humiliation of God. God would establish His Kingdom, not by the conquering and killing of sinful rebels like us, but by His Son, Jesus, becoming a servant, offering up Himself, and dying on a cross as the payment for all of our sins. His death overcame sin and Satan. His resurrection from the dead confirmed that victory.

His Kingdom has been established. But it is not found in any massive visible earthly territory, but invisibly in the individual hearts of people whom the Holy Spirit has called by the Gospel, enlightened with His gifts, sanctified, and kept in the one truth faith. The Kingdom is not established nor does it grow through mass marketing techniques or the latest religious fad. The humble Kingdom comes through humble means: the Word of God. Through the washing of the Word of God in baptism, the speaking of the Word of God in preaching, and the tasting of the Word of God in the Lord's Supper, the Kingdom continues to grow and expand throughout our congregation, our community, and the world.

Whenever you become like John the Baptist and are tempted to doubt by asking Jesus, "Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?", He might give you an answer similar to the one He gave the disciples of John the Baptist, "Go and tell what you hear and see." What the

Messiah is supposed to do, Jesus is doing. He is still calling individuals to faith through the Word of God. He is still washing away the sins of people, one by one, in Holy Baptism. He is still giving out the forgiveness of sins through Holy Absolution. He is still feeding people and their faith with His body and blood in Holy Communion. Connect the dots, people. His answer is a resounding, "Yes!" He *is* the one. He is who He said He is. He did what He said He would do. He gives what He promises He would give.

Jesus also invites us to accept in faith a strange paradox. He asks us to believe that the Kingdom of God is here among us and that evil has been conquered by His death and resurrection, but that the visible manifestations of that evil have not yet been overthrown. He calls us blessed if we are not offended by the way He is doing this.

We do that precisely by living, not in doubt or disbelief, but with pure joy in these end times. It's like watching a movie you've seen before or have been told about. It may be a scary movie, but it doesn't scare you because you know how it ends. It's not that evil is not real or that times are not difficult. Evil is real and the times are difficult. We know how this turns out and that gives us joy.

We also live with hope – the sure and certain confidence in that which is ours but not yet in our possession, namely the Kingdom of God. We look forward with great anticipation and excitement to the end of all paradoxes – when the Kingdom of God which has been real, yet hidden, since the first coming of Jesus will be the Kingdom of God which is revealed and seen with the second coming of Jesus.

John the Baptist wasn't wrong. You aren't either. Jesus Christ is the One who was to come, the One who has come, and the One who will come again. Amen.