

“Believe”

Matthew 11:2-6

December 15, 2013

3rd Sunday in Advent

One of the accusations frequently hurled against Christianity (especially Lutheranism) is that it's just too easy. All you have to do is believe! All you have to do is believe? Is that easy? I suppose it is easy to believe in God when you are sitting here peacefully in church. It is easy to believe in God when God is doing what you think He should be doing and your life is going smoothly. However, when life is NOT going well it can be difficult to believe in God, especially when He is not doing what you think He should be doing or what you want Him to be doing.

A case in point is John the Baptist. He should have had the most unshakeable faith there ever was. He was the cousin of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh. He was the prophesied preparer for the coming Messiah. He had so confidently and boldly preached the Word of God, calling people to repentance, faith, and the production of fruit worthy of repentance as we read in last week's Gospel reading.

Yet, as John sat in prison for faithfully preaching the Word of God, he was troubled. He called his followers to him and sent them with a question to Jesus. The question betrayed his doubt and disillusionment. He asked, “Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?” John wonders if Jesus is really the Promised Messiah and, if not, maybe they should look for someone else. How did the preparer for the Messiah become the doubter of the Messiah?

For one thing, God didn't do what John expected him to do. Remember last week's Gospel? John had said the Messiah was coming to bring judgment and fire. People who didn't repent and believe immediately were going to be like unfruitful trees – chopped down and thrown into the fire. Jesus appeared on the scene, preaching and teaching. But He brought no judgment and no fire. John was puzzled.

For another thing, John was personally suffering, locked up in prison, not for doing wrong, but for faithfully proclaiming and doing what God had told him to proclaim and do. He was probably

thinking, “What’s the deal? If the Messiah is coming to free His people, what am I doing locked up in prison?” This whole thing was not looking like the kingdom of heaven he signed up for, nor was Jesus looking much like the Messiah he had envisioned.

It’s easy to try and defend John and make excuses for him. Early church fathers, who simply could not believe that John himself could have had doubts, said that John did not doubt, but was only asking the question on behalf of his disciples so that Jesus could set them straight. But there’s nothing in the text which indicates that. Besides, John, although he was a talented and important prophet, was still a sinful human being like the rest of us.

It then becomes easy to overly critical of John. How could he have doubted? How could he have questioned? It should have been obvious to John with Jesus right there with him. But John follows in the shoes of some prominent doubters – Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah – all of whom complained about their lot in life when God didn’t act in the way they expected and they suffered because of it.

But, then again, don’t we follow in those same shoes? We profess belief in Jesus Christ as our Savior and trust in God’s plan. We maintain that belief and trust as long as things are going well. But doubt and disillusionment can pop up in our minds as easily as it did in John’s mind.

We look around us and see that evil is flourishing. Biblical morality is taking a beating, not only outside the church, but sometimes even within the church. Not only do things not seem to be getting better. They seem to be getting worse. Every year in Advent, we talk about Jesus returning in glory to judge the world and to punish the wicked and evildoers. I’m celebrating my 58th Advent. Some of you have celebrated more. Have you seen any judgment yet? Any punishment? I haven’t seen any and it’s not fair. Evildoers are doing just fine.

Meanwhile, even though we try to be faithful to the Word of God as John was, we continue to suffer. We may not be sitting in jail (yet) for being a Christian, but we suffer ridicule and rejection for beliefs and our moral positions on abortion, end of life issues, homosexuality, premarital sex, divorce...the list could go on and on.

None of this looks like the kingdom of heaven as we thought it would be, either within our world or within our personal lives. We may begin to wonder, as John did, if this Jesus is really all He's cracked up to be. Is He the one to save us from all this mess that we are in? Can He even do it? Or should we look for someone or something else. It's like the story about a man who fell off a cliff. On his way down, he was able to grab hold of a tree branch and hang on. Although it stopped his fall, he found himself several hundred feet above ground with nowhere to go. In desperation, he looked to the heavens and shouted, "Is there anyone up there?" A voice came back and said, "Yes, let go of the branch and trust in me." There was a pause and then the man said, "Is there anyone ELSE up there?"

Let's look back and see how Jesus answered John's question. First, there are a few things Jesus does not do. Jesus does not rebuke John for his lack of faith, or immediately improve his situation in response to John's suffering. Neither does Jesus give John's disciples a direct answer to John's question. Jesus does not say, "No, I'm not the Messiah. You better look for someone else" or "Yes, I am the Messiah. There's no need to question that."

Instead, Jesus says, "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 poor have good news preached to them." Jesus is not bragging here, nor is He simply listing His resume. Jesus is making a very profound point.

What had people heard? They had heard the Word of God regarding the Messiah as it had been read and preached to them in the synagogues and now in the ministry of Jesus. They were familiar with the prophecies of the Messiah, like the one we heard today from Isaiah, in which the time of the Messiah is described as being a time when blind people will see, lame people will walk, lepers will be cleansed, deaf people would hear, and poor people would have good news preached to them.

What were the people now seeing? They were seeing Jesus giving sight to the blind, strength to the lame, hearing to deaf people, and good news to poor people. It doesn't take much to connect

the dots. The Bible says what the Messiah will do. Jesus is now doing what the Bible says the Messiah will do. What God promised to do, Jesus does. Jesus is the Messiah.

Our experience is similar. We wonder if Jesus really was the Savior and if God is really in charge of the mess in this world. Like with John, Jesus does not rebuke us for wondering or wipe us out for doubting. He doesn't immediately improve our situation, nor does He give us a direct answer. Instead, like with John, Jesus encourages us to pay attention to what we hear and see.

What do we hear? We hear the Word of God regarding Jesus and His Kingdom just like John did. After Jesus' resurrection, Jesus said to the two men on the road to Emmaus, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke 24:47) Before ascending into heaven, Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

What do we now see? We see repentance for sin and forgiveness of sin being proclaimed for the sake of Jesus' death on the cross and because of His resurrection from the dead. We see disciples for Jesus Christ being made by people being baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and by people being taught the Word of God. Today, we even get to see people confessing that faith publicly through the work of the Holy Spirit through baptism and the Word of God. What Jesus promises to do, He does.

What does this all mean? For John and the people in his day and for us and the people in our day, it is the same. Believing is much more than accepting your personal beliefs to be true as to how God does or should work. Believing is not conditional upon your personal situation – something you do when things are going well and something you don't do when things are not going well.

Jesus' final words to John's disciples tell us what believing is all about. Jesus says, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." Many people stumble over Jesus because none of this makes any sense and they are offended by it. The believing which the Holy Spirit has created in

you by baptism and maintains in you by the Word of God means to accept and hold as true paradoxes – seemingly contradictory things – without being offended or upset by them.

Evil runs rampant in our world, but the reign of God has broken into history in the person of Jesus Christ and God is in charge. We see nothing changing, but Jesus is at work in the lives of people to bring repentance, forgiveness of sin, and everlasting life through the baptizing, preaching, and teaching done by sinful human beings whom He has sent. We see no hope for the future – only gloom and doom, but Jesus is the one who is to come. He came in John's time to earn forgiveness through His death on the cross and to guarantee everlasting life through His rising to life from the tomb. He will come again to rescue us from the evil of this world which plagues us now and to bring us to everlasting life in the world to come.

After tough words such as "hosanna" and "repent", you might have thought the word, "believe" would be an easy one. But it's not. Believing in Jesus Christ is very difficult. It is much easier to be offended by Jesus or stumble over His message and actions. Like repentance, believing is a gift given to us by the Holy Spirit. We live by believing, even when it means struggling with the paradox of salvation already won and salvation not yet fully experienced. When you are tempted not to believe, remember Jesus' words to John when he was tempted, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." And remember what you have heard and look around to what you can see. Amen.