

SECOND READING: Matthew 11:2-11,

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²When John heard in prison what the Messiah^[a] was doing, he sent word by his^[b] disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers^[c] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

⁷As 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? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone^[d] dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet?^[e] Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

¹¹Truly 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.

This is the word of the Lord **Thanks be to God.**

FIRST READING: Isaiah 35:1-10

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The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. ³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸ A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰ And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

“Do Not Fear! Here is Your God”

I think our first response when we read this text from Matthew today might very well be to say, “What?” “What?” “John the Baptist asked WHAT of Jesus?” The scripture tells us that John sent his own disciples to ask Jesus this penetrating question, “*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*” In other words, “*Are you who I thought you were? Are you the long-awaited Messiah, God’s anointed? Are you God’s promised redeemer?*” What has come over John? Wasn’t he the one who leapt in his mother, Elizabeth’s womb, even before he was born because he recognized Jesus as the Messiah for his people? Wasn’t this John the Baptist, the one who pointed to Jesus when he saw him on the banks of the Jordan and said, “*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” Isn’t this John, whose purpose was to prepare the way in repentant hearts for the One who would baptize not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire? What in the world is going on here?

Well, before we can answer this question, it’s important to consider the context, right? In this case, not just the context of the author, but the context of the character. John was in prison at the time. He was awaiting his execution by Herod, because he had called Herod out publicly for killing his own brother, and then having an affair with his brother’s wife. John was in a bad place physically, emotionally, and very likely, spiritually. He’d been dehumanized as only prison can do to a person. And when we consider this context it’s not too surprising that he’d likely begun to doubt his own core convictions about Jesus. But also, we need understand that John had LONGED for, John had deeply WANTED, John had EXPECTED the Messiah to be one who carried out final judgment, who would lay the ax to the trees, and burn every one that did not bear fruit. John, as you might recall was an Essene. The Essenes were a Jewish mystical sect who lived lives of ritual purity and separation. The Messiah, in John’s mind, was to “*clean up a world that had become impassable with dead wood.*”¹ Yet the world around John was still so grim. The Romans were still in power, exercising their ruthless and violent hold over his people. There had been no massive military move against these oppressors, to say

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, Sermon: The Marginal Messiah: Matt 11: 2-11 in *The Seeds of Heaven* (Louisville: WJKP; 2004), 10.

nothing about the continuing presence of poverty, violence, suffering, sin, and death. John was, quite simply disillusioned and he was afraid!

And we can identify with John, can't we? Not that we are languishing in a dark and dank 1c prison. No, but we live in a fearful time. Most of the same things swirl around us, injustices, violence, poverty, suffering, sin and death ...and at such enormous levels. If one listens very much to the world news, the fearful state of things can be simply overwhelming, paralyzing, in fact. And things in our own country are very frightening. I recently read a statement written by commentator, Bob Greene. He wrote it 18 years ago, following the 9-11 attack... "*Today, fear is not a byproduct—it is the primary item. Evidently those who attacked us do not want our land, our riches, our buildings. What they want is to sew chaos and terror...Fear itself is their goal.*"² I had to think that honestly, the feeling he expressed is the same now in so many respects, considering we are struggling with great concerns about cyber insecurity and an enemy out there somewhere gaining control of our national, and by extension our personal information. It occurred to me that this, by intent, has sewn chaos in our government which has resulted in such polarizing vitriolic contention and destabilization that we've watched it erupt in all kinds of tribal and irrational hatreds around and between everyday citizens. We hear it every day on the news. We experience often in our lives. It is a fearful thing.

Fear also has "*a market force.*"³ Just think of what we buy out of fear: security systems, guns, and identity theft and other protective software. (Mike just bought me a computer and the first thing we're installing is Norton antivirus and antimalware). At the last Presbytery meeting, one of the freebies given away at a booth at the exhibitors' theatre were those sleeves that are used to protect your credit cards from walk-by scammers. They came in all kinds of pretty colors with CHURCH logos on them. Fear has a market force.

And think also how fear is a force for other things too, like "population shifts and resettlement efforts". Refugees move across borders, and city dwellers flee to the suburbs due

² Bob Green. Quoted in John Buchanan. *Fear Not*" <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/022507.html> (accessed 12/6/19).

³ John Buchanan. *Fear Not*" <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/022507.html> (accessed 12/6/19).

to fear of violence in their current living environments. People scatter to higher ground due to the flooding predictions of environmental change. And, of course, fear affects our productivity and our social interactions by damaging our psyches, keeping us from reaching for greatness, from achieving our full potentials, sometimes from simply trying. Episodes of humiliation, rejection or bullying can scar us for life. That ever-present “fear” can keep us from taking the qualifying exam, applying for the position, trying out for the team, saying to another ‘I love you’, or to ourselves ‘I think I can do that’. Yes, fear is a tremendous power, sometimes necessary for living, but most often, not. Most often it is contrary to life, good life, that is.

So Jesus compassionately answered his dear friend, John’s question, “*Are you the one?*” like this: *the blind are receiving sight, the lame are walking, the lepers are being cleansed, the deaf are hearing, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them!* He knew that John would recognize this to be a portion of Isaiah’s prophesy, a portion which described the circumstances that would be present when the Anointed One, the Messiah, had come. While we are not told, it is probable, at least we hope, that John, when he heard this, rejoiced and rested in the fact that Jesus was indeed even then ushering in the Kingdom of God, no, not as a military leader, but in his own divine way. Most certainly John would have gone on to recall the remainder of the prophesy as well, that which was written by Isaiah 550 years earlier, when the Israelites were about to be taken into captivity by the Babylonians, a cruel and powerful enemy. John would have remembered, as he faced his own imminent death, the encouraging words, “*Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear’ Here is your God.*”

(Pause) You know, not many weeks ago, my cousin, Mary, passed away. While we’d lost touch over the years, we were pretty close when we ourselves were young. Suddenly, however, during this last year my sisters and I and Mary connected again through social media. In our conversations, I found out about her illness, but the weird thing was that I kept forgetting because Mary just seemed to be so happy. She just was going on with things. She always was doing things, and she just poured out such great love for me and everyone and everything else. The pictures I saw of her were in her home, smiling and hugging her daughter and her sister,

my other cousin, and her dog. The announcement of her passing consequently really took me by surprise. I just hardly could believe it. (pause) I think I will write her husband a letter soon and I believe I may include this quote I discovered as I prepared this sermon from Rev. John Buchanan. "Faith does not mean that fear disappears. It means going on doing what you need to do, going on with your living, your loving, your caring, your passion, in spite of your fear—because something has happened that is more real, more pervasive, more powerful, more to be trusted than whatever it is you are afraid of, even your own death."⁴ While she did not speak of her faith to me, my guess is that Mary knew of this bigger, more pervasive, more real, more to be trusted thing than what she was afraid of.

Friends, brothers and sisters, as we now are nearing closer and closer to Christmas, we need heed the truth that the One whom John and his people were waiting for has come. He has come with such a passionate love for us and with the express purpose of setting us free from what we are afraid of, from all that which causes us dread, from all which causes us shame and guilt, from all which causes us to run and hide. He's come to take on our lot and to set us free from that which holds us back and from that which keeps us from reaching for what we were created to be. Jesus has come to spread his bigger, more real, more pervasive, more to be trusted healing love among us and in us and for us forever and ever. The babe of Bethlehem is the One. Look. *"the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear...Say to those who are of a fearful heart. Do not fear. Here is your God".* Amen.

⁴ John Buchanan.