

December 11, 2016  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
Matthew 11:2-11

We hear such a different John the Baptist this week. Last week, John was positively exuberant with righteous anger. He knew it. He just knew the old order was coming to an end and Israel was going to be in trouble. That brood of vipers! The faithlessness, the arrogance, the wickedness of Israel's leaders was too much and God would ensure that their actions were met with justice. Even now the ax was at the tree<sup>1</sup>.

But this week, we hear a different John. A doubtful John. He's in prison and gets word back to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" He had been so sure about Jesus, but now he's not so certain. When will there be chaff burning? Where is the winnowing fork? Not being overly familiar with wheat farming, I'm not too sure what those are, but I am pretty certain that I'd know a winnowing fork if I saw one. The leaders of Israel are not so much chastened as triumphant. John is not speaking to crowds hungry for his words; he is in jail. Why shouldn't he be doubtful?

John expected a military leader, perhaps. A warrior king in the mold of David. He has given his life for this promised savior, but he doesn't recognize him in Jesus.

I can understand John's disappointment and doubt. "Are you the one? Or are we to wait for another?" is the kind of question many of us ask in all kinds of ways, some even trivial ways. Is this the gift I should get? Or should I spend my money on the something else? Is this the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:1-12

party I want to attend? Some more significant: Is this the person I still love? Is this the job I want? Is this the church I want to commit to or is there another better place for me to be?

These can be important questions of discernment and we ask such questions when our expectations have not been met, when we are disappointed. This season can be a difficult time for many of us because there is a cultural expectation that families will be together and that shared experiences will be joyful. But reality doesn't fit our expectations very often. Last Monday, we held a service here of loss and remembrance. People gathered together and remembered all the people who wouldn't be home for the holidays this year – some had been gone for a long time, some had died this year. But all were a reminder that for each person we named in the service, someone was missing them.

Some of us are discouraged by the political landscape. The election didn't turn out the way we hoped or expected. It's troubling to see churches defaced with racist graffiti or particular groups being threatened and bullied.

Sometimes I think, is this the ministry we should be doing or is there a better, more efficient way to help the most vulnerable, engage our members, and bring in new people? Is making sandwiches really going to help hungry people? Maybe we should be savvier about how we tackle poverty.

And what about this gun violence problem? Are t-shirts in the courtyard really going to change hearts and minds? Doubtful. Are laws regulating guns really going to stop violence? Definitely not. Should we really be holding this vigil or is there something else we should be doing?

John in prison, doubtful and discouraged, is not the spokesperson we would have wanted or hoped for this late in Advent, this close to Christmas and a New Year that should be filled with new possibilities. But his questions seems to fit our time: “are you the one? Or are we to wait for another?”

So what answer does Jesus send back? Jesus says, “what do 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.” See Jesus doesn’t come to fit into our narrow expectations of what a savior looks like or what a savior does. Jesus just got to work doing what needs to be done. People who are hungry, people who are hurting, people who are weeping want to be fed, to be healed, and to be comforted. They don’t have every detail worked out of how “God with us” will be with us.

When we are doubtful and discouraged it is okay to ask the Advent question: Is God at work in the world? Do I believe God is breaking into our world here and now?

We'll take a look at this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hU0I7j0b9TY>  
What did you see? Let me tell you what I see. I see the hungry being fed. I see St. Mark’s parishioners dancing for joy. I see the cold are being warmed and children are being loved. Step into the void and offer something. I expect you’ll find it’s generative. That good acts beget other good acts. When you give yourself, the dessert won’t seem as barren.

Come this week on Wednesday or Thursday and you will see those who mourn will be comforted, those who feel lost will find new direction, and the powerful will listen to those who feel powerless.

Join Sunday Suppers next Sunday night and participate for yourself. Don't take my word for it, come and see. Perhaps you will experience what I am feeling right now, that the discouraged are finding hope. Is God at work here and now? Well, what do you see?