**Advent: Welcoming Jesus**

**The Third Sunday of Advent**

**December 17, 2017**

**“Are You the One?” (Matthew 11:1-11)**

**1. Introduction: *Expectations***

As the days count down to Christmas people experience different kinds of emotions. Some are stressed with all the preparations and shopping to do. Others are happy as they look forward to a time with family and friends. Still others are feeling blue because they’re alone or missing someone this Christmas. Little children are eagerly anticipating Christmas morning because they can finally open their presents. At the same time people have different expectations for Christmas. Expectations for a happy day with family; for great gifts under the tree; for a perfect Christmas dinner; for an inspiring Christmas eve service. But as you and I know, our expectations are not always matched by reality. Things don’t always go according to plan.

This year we’re hosting the family Christmas, so Sherri’s family and my sister are coming over on Christmas day and staying over for boxing day. The last time we hosted Christmas was 2013, the year of the infamous ice storm which caused massive destruction and widespread power outages (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-ice-storm-leaves-230-000-without-power-1.2473543>). I hope we don’t get a repeat of those unfortunate events! That year we celebrated the family Christmas the weekend before Christmas day. We had our big meal on the Saturday and the freezing rain started that afternoon and continued all night long. The weight of the ice snapped off several large branches from our big maple tree in the back yard. We woke up on Sunday morning with no electricity, no heat and a big mess in the back yard. Our plans for a nice, relaxing Sunday with family were thwarted. After eating a cold breakfast in a cold house, the great exodus occurred as all the relatives fled the chaotic mess of Toronto for greener pastures. I’m sure that everyone here has an ice storm story to tell. One thing is certain, Christmas, that year, was not what many people had planned for or expected.

 John the Baptist had expectations too. This morning’s Gospel lesson from Matthew features a John who is wondering if Jesus really is the promised Messiah. Clearly, Jesus and his ministry did not match up with John’s hopes and dreams for the advent of the Messiah.

**2. John’s Question: *Are You the Messiah?***

The Gospel passage begins with a transition from one section to another. Jesus has just given extensive instructions to his disciples before he sends them out on a mission (10:1-42). After giving them these marching orders, he too goes out to teach and to preach in the surrounding towns (11:1). Then the scene shifts to John the Baptist (11:2), a character we met last Sunday. But a lot has changed from when we first encountered him. He is no longer out in the wilderness preaching and baptizing, but he is in prison. Matthew indicates that John was arrested just as Jesus began his ministry in Galilee (4:12). Later on in the Gospel narrative, Herod Antipas hears a report about Jesus’ miracles and concludes that he must be John the Baptist back from the dead (14:2). What follows is a flashback, telling the story of John’s arrest and execution (14:3-12).

 Matthew tells us that John confronted Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great, and the current ruler or tetrarch over Galilee and Perea. John dared to voice his opposition to Herod’s marriage to his sister-in-law. It was a sordid affair in the royal household! Herod Antipas was married, but had an affair with his brother’s wife, Herodias. Both divorced their spouses and got married (Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew,* p. 137). In response to this John told Herod that it was unlawful for him to take Herodias as his wife (14:4). The prophet’s words, of course, were met with hostility and he was arrested and imprisoned in the fortress of Machaerus on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:116-119). While in prison, John hears reports about the “works of the Messiah” (11:2) and so he sends an envoy to Jesus with an important question.

 So John’s disciples ask Jesus, “Are you the Messiah we’ve been waiting for, or should we keep looking for someone else?” (11:4). Our first response to John’s question is one of shock. In last week’s Gospel lesson, he was this bold prophet, announcing God’s intervention into the world and calling people to respond by turning their lives around. Now this herald of the Messiah has some real doubts that Jesus is God’s promised Messiah. How did this transformation take place? What caused John to begin to question Jesus’ messianic mission? While we can’t get inside the head of John the Baptist and observe his inner dialogue at that time, Matthew’s Gospel offers us a few clues as to what led to John’s inquiry. First, John hears about Jesus’ deeds while *in prison* (11:2)*.* Commenting on John’s question, Michael Green writes, “It is not surprising that he had questions and doubts in such a place as that . . . everything tends to get out of proportion when you are suffering for a long time in a confined space as John was. Doubts grow in such a soil” (Green, *The Message of Matthew,* pp. 137-38). Adding to the sting of his imprisonment was the complete injustice of the situation. John was fulfilling his prophetic task when he confronted Herod Antipas, in much the same way that the prophet Nathan confronted King David with his wrongdoing (2 Samuel 12:1-13). Unlike King David, however, Herod did not recognize his wrong and repent. Instead, he silenced the prophet by locking him up in his fortress. Perhaps John was wondering where God’s justice was and why God was not vindicating the cause of the righteous.

 During his imprisonment John was hearing reports about Jesus’ activities, his words and his deeds, which Matthew records in chapters 4 to 9. Even though, Matthew calls these “the works of the Messiah or the Christ,” John wondered if they really were signs that the Messiah had arrived. John anticipated a slightly different sort of career for the Messiah. His preaching, as recorded in Matthew 3:10-12, indicates that he viewed the messianic mission as one of *immediate judgment*. Using two images, tree cutting and grain harvesting, John proclaimed that the Messiah would enact divine judgment right away. He boldly declared, “The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (3:10) and “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (3:12). While John was correct in his expectation that the Messiah would bring divine judgment, this would come at the end of the age (13:39, 40, 49; 25:31-46). Jesus was a different kind of Messiah than John had imagined because he didn’t appear to be hacking down trees or threshing wheat just yet.

But then again, lots of people had all sorts of ideas about what the Messiah would be like. Some Jews at that time thought that the Messiah would be a military leader who would purge the land of foreign rule and restore Israel to the glories of the Davidic kingdom. In contrast, Jesus’ earthly ministry could be characterized as comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable. He challenged the self-righteous complacency of those who thought they were in God’s good books. But to those who felt estranged from God, he spoke of God’s love and forgiveness. As Matthew’s story of Jesus continues, many of its characters struggle with Jesus’ messianic identity. Even one of his closest disciples, Simon Peter, struggles with Jesus’ prediction that he, the Messiah, must die (16:21-22).

The lesson for us in this passage is to reflect upon the kinds of expectations that we place upon Jesus. For example, in our personal lives we may be experiencing some real difficult times and wonder where God is. Maybe we expect that God will sweep in and clear up all of our difficulties. Our congregation is filled with faithful, committed people who serve, care and pray. So why do we face the kinds of challenges that we do? Why doesn’t God rain down his instant blessings and give us success in everything we do? Is our definition of success the same as God’s? Do the expectations that we have for a particular situation correspond with God’s plans? Is John’s question our question for Jesus? - “Are you the Messiah we’ve been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?”

**3. Jesus’ Response: *Look at the Signs of the Kingdom***

I find it interesting that Jesus responded to John’s question not with condemnation, frustration or anger, but with a call to consider the evidence. Jesus didn’t chide John for his lack of faith or dismiss his question as being ridiculous. He gave him a real answer. This teaches us that we can go to God with our questions, even if they spring from moments of doubt.

 Jesus sent John’s disciples back John with a resounding, “Yes,” to his question. His ministry was messianic. The proof was in the pudding! “When you go back,” Jesus told them, “Tell John what you hear and see” (11:4). And then in a wonderful convergence, the acts of Jesus and echoes of Isaiah are placed side-by-side, sending a clear message that the ministry of Jesus the Messiah fulfills God’s grand promises of salvation.

“*Go and tell what you hear and see*:

• “The *blind* receive their sight” and Jesus healed two blind men in Matthew 9:27-31.

• “The *lame* walk” and Jesus healed a paralyzed man in Matthew 9:1-8.

• “The *lepers* are cleansed” and Jesus healed a leper in Matthew 8:1-4.

• “The *deaf* hear” and Jesus healed a deaf/mute man in Matthew 9:32-33.

• “The *dead* are raised” and Jesus raised a dead girl to life in Matthew 9:18-26.

• “The *good news* is proclaimed to the *poor*” and Jesus preached, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).

Jesus’ deeds conform to the Scriptural blueprints of God’s kingdom work. His words and deeds resound with unmistakable echoes of Isaiah the prophet. For Isaiah declares,

“And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the *blind* and unplug the ears of the *deaf*. The *lame* will leap like a deer, and those who *cannot speak* will sing for joy! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the wasteland (Isaiah 35:5-6).

Elsewhere Isaiah proclaims, “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to bring *good news* to the *poor*. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the Lord’s favor has come, and with it, the day of God’s anger against their enemies (Isaiah 61:1-2).

This convergence of Jesus’ ministry and Isaiah’s prophecies clearly establish that Jesus is “the Messiah of prophesy who, through his proclamation to the poor and his miracles and compassionate deeds, brings to fulfilment the messianic oracles uttered so long ago by Isaiah the prophet” (Davies and Allison, *Matthew,* p. 242). In Jesus the Messiah, the kingdom of God has powerfully broken into the world. Yet, John and many others have different expectations for the ministry of the Messiah.

Upon closer inspection this listing of the “deeds of the Messiah” centres on people that society, in Jesus’ day and ours, tends to overlook. The blind, the deaf, the lame and the leper were often destitute and outcasts to the social and religious life of the community. In our society the blind, the deaf, the disabled and the poor are often isolated from the mainstream due to their limitations. So God’s kingdom focuses on the marginalized. Summarizing the lesson of third week of Advent and John’s question to Jesus, Joan Chittister writes, “This Jesus . . . is to be found with the poor and the needy, the outcast and the oppressed” (*The Liturgical Year,* p. 67).

The challenge for all of us is to look for the signs of the kingdom in our midst. In what ways does our kingdom work reach out to the folks on the margins? Are there neglected people in our neighbourhood, our city, our country and our world who need God’s healing and good news? Are we willing to have Jesus the Messiah perform his kingdom work in our midst and exceed our expectations? Are we ready for his sacred surprises this Advent?

**4. Conclusion: *To Listen, To Look***

 I’d like to end with a poem from Ann Weems’ wonderful book of poetry, entitled, *Kneeling in Bethlehem.* This poem is entitled, “To Listen, To Look.”

Is it all sewn up – my life?

Is it at this point so predictable,

 so orderly,

 so neat,

 so arranged,

 so right,

 that I don’t have time or space

 for listening for the rustle of angels’ wings

 or running to the stables to see a baby?

Could this be what he meant when he said

 Listen, those who have ears to hear . . .

 Look, those who have eyes to see?

O God, give me the humbleness of those shepherds

 who saw in the cold December darkness

 the Coming of the Light

 the Advent of Love!

Go and tell what you see and hear!