**Advent: *The Season of Joy***

**Sunday December 15, 2019**

**Advent 3: “Signs of the Kingdom” (Matthew 11:2-11)**

**1. Introduction: *What Can I Give Him?***

Christina Rossetti’s poem, *A Christmas Carol,* ends with these well-know words:

*What can I give Him,*

*Poor as I am?*

*If I were a shepherd*

*I would bring a lamb,*

*If I were a Wise Man*

*I would do my part,—*

*Yet what I can I give Him,*

*Give my heart.*

Amidst the frantic activity of Christmas and all that this brings, my prayer for all of us is that we would take the time to give Jesus our hearts this Christmas. For before we can even begin to be sent into the world to love others, we need to know and love Jesus.

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

The Gospel lesson begins with John the Baptist’s burning question for Jesus, “*Are you the One we’ve been expecting, or are we still waiting?*” (Matthew 11:1-3, *The Message*). Within the larger narrative of the Gospel, Jesus has just given his disciples detailed instructions before sending them out on mission (Matthew 10:1-42). While they were out on the mission field, Jesus was also out preaching and teaching (Matthew 11:1). Amidst all this activity, the scene shifts to John the Baptist, a character we encountered in last Sunday’s Gospel lesson. But a lot has changed from those days when he was out in the wilderness, calling people to repent, confronting the religious leaders, and baptizing the multitudes. He was now in prison. Matthew indicates that John was arrested just as Jesus began his ministry in Galilee (Matthew 4:12). Later in the Gospel, through a flashback, we learn about the events behind John’s arrest and eventual execution (Matthew 14:2-12).

This flashback in Matthew 14 reveals that John dared to confront Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great, and the ruler of Galilee and Perea at that time. John voiced his opposition to Herod’s marriage to his sister-in-law. It was a rather sordid affair within the royal household! Herod was married, but had an affair with his brother’s wife, Herodias. Both divorced their spouses and got married. In response to this scandal, John told Herod that it was not lawful for him to take Herodias as his wife (Matthew 14:4). The prophet’s words, however, were met with hostility and Herod arrested and imprisoned him in the fortress of Machaerus on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:116-119). While in prison, John heard reports about “*the works of the Messiah*” (Matthew 11:2) and so he sent some envoys to Jesus with a very important question.

Upon their arrival, John’s disciples asked Jesus, “*Are you the Messiah we’ve been waiting for, or should we keep looking for someone else?*” (Matthew 11:4). This surprising question makes us wonder what had changed in John’s life to bring about this line of inquiry. This bold prophet had announced the nearness of the kingdom of God (Matthew 3:2). He also heralded the coming of the Messiah, speaking of the *greater one* who would come and *baptize the people with the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 3:11). He was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord, and calling people to turn to God. But now this herald of the Messiah was wondering if Jesus was God’s promised Messiah. What happened? How did this transformation take place? What caused John to begin to question Jesus’ messianic identity?

While we can’t get inside the head of John the Baptist or psychoanalyse the passage, the Gospel itself offers us a few clues as to what led to John’s inquiry. First, John was *in prison* when he heard about Jesus’ activities and sent his representatives to him (Matthew 11:2-3)*.* Bible commentator, Michael Green notes the significance of this, writing, “It is not surprising that he (John) 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). But unlike King David, Herod did not recognize his sin 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.

Second, John had *certain expectations* for the ministry of the Messiah. During his imprisonment, he was hearing reports about what Jesus was doing (Matthew 11:2). But he wondered if these were the true marks of the Messiah’s ministry. John seemed to have anticipated a slightly different career for God’s Anointed One. 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 justice 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” (Matthew 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” (Matthew 3:12). While John was correct in his belief about divine judgment, he didn’t realize that it would come at the end of the age (Matthew 13:39, 40, 49; 25:31-46). In the meantime, Jesus appears to have been a different kind of Messiah than John had expected, which led to his question.

This should cause us to reflect upon the kinds of expectations that we place upon Jesus. For example, in our personal lives we may experience some real difficult times and wonder where God is. Maybe we’re expecting God to swoop in and clear up all our difficulties with a wave of his hand. Our congregation is filled with faithful and 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 instant blessings and give us success in everything we do? But is our definition of success the same as God’s? Do our hopes correspond with God’s plans? Is John’s question for Jesus, ours too? - “*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 an invitation 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 thoughtful response. This teaches us that we can go to God with our questions, even if they seem to express doubt. Like John, we’re all trying to discern God’s will and ways in the world, so asking God for insight is perfectly fine .

Jesus’ response, however, was a call to observe the signs and make up one’s own mind. This is what *faith* is all about. He didn’t give John the easy or direct answer, saying, “Yes, of course I’m the Messiah.” Instead he instructed the envoys to return and report to John about the things they had *seen* and *heard* during their time with Jesus and the disciples (Matthew 11:4). What, you may ask, had they *seen* and *heard*?

“*the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor*.”

The miracles of healing that are recorded in Matthew chapters 8 and 9 are summarized here. The implication is that John’s disciples observed or heard reports of Jesus’ healing of the blind (Matthew 9:27-31), the lame (Matthew 9:1-8), the leper (Matthew 8:1-4), the deaf (9:32-33) and his raising to life of the dead (Matthew 9:18-26). The climax of the list, the poor hearing good news, points back to the Sermon on the Mound where Jesus proclaimed, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 5:3). John’s disciples may have also observed the ministry of Jesus’ disciples as they were sent out in Matthew 10:8 with these instructions: “*Heal the sick, raise the dead, cure those with leprosy, and cast out demons*.”

Jesus’ response to John calls him to consider what he was doing, but also to see the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in his miracles and preaching. His kingdom activities matched the voice of Scripture. These acts of Jesus echo the words of Isaiah, sending a clear message that the ministry of Jesus the Messiah fulfills God’s grand promises of salvation. For Isaiah declared,

* “In that day the *deaf* will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness

the eyes of the *blind* will see. Once more the *humble* will rejoice in the Lord; the *needy* will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel (Isaiah 29:18-19).

* “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).
* “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 broken hearted 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).

Jesus’ deeds conform to the Scriptural blueprints of God’s kingdom work. The convergence of Jesus’ ministry and Isaiah’s words 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).

This passage has a few implications for us as we seek to be involved in God’s kingdom work in our community.

This listing of the “deeds of the Messiah” centres on people who are often overlooked. The blind, the deaf, the lame and the leper were usually destitute and outsiders within the social and religious world of Jesus’ time. In our society the blind, the deaf, the disabled and the poor are often isolated from the mainstream due to their limitations and our prejudices. But God’s kingdom focuses on the outcasts. In what ways does our kingdom work reach out to the folks on the margins? Are there neglected and broken people in our neighbourhood who need God’s healing and good news? The challenge for all of us is to look for the signs of the kingdom in our midst. To see what God is doing and to get on board with it.

In my time here I’ve talked a lot about God’s kingdom breaking into our world and our need to be engaged in God’s mission. You have responded positively to this challenge and have ministered in wonderful ways to others. But in our eagerness to serve God, we must never forget the most important thing – Christ calls us to himself before he sends us out in mission. Mark 3:13-15 reads, “He (Jesus) climbed a mountain and invited those he wanted with him. They climbed together. He settled on twelve and designated them apostles. The plan was that *they would be with him, and he would send them out* to proclaim the Word and give them authority to banish demons.” Notice the key words here, he called them so that that *they would be with him*. We cannot be sent out to do God’s kingdom work unless we are first connected to Christ and are spending precious time with him. At the same time, we are called together as a cohort of disciples, joined together in Christ to minister to our world. We are the body of Christ, each one of us is a part in that body and every part is essential for God’s mission in the world.

Again, the poetry of Ann Weems expresses my thoughts so well:

“The Holy Spirit is poured out upon us

and sends us out together

aflame with new life,

inheritors of the wealth of God:  
 life abundant.

We are liberated from the prisons of pettiness,

jealousy, and greed,

liberated to be the church

We are freed to free others.

We are affirmed to affirm others.

We are loved to love others.

We are family;

we are community.

We are the church triumphant –

you, me, anyone who would come to the Lord –

renewed, redirected, empowered

to change things and to change lives

together in love and wholeness.

We are the Lord’s church,

the church of justice and mercy,

the people sent to open prisons,

to heal the sick

to clothe the naked

to feed the hungry

to reconcile

to be alleluias when there is not music.

The mantle is upon our shoulders.

Joy is apparent in our living.

We have been commissioned to be the church of Jesus Christ.

(Ann Weems, The Church Year, *Kneeling in Bethlehem,* pp. 81-82)