

### **Advent 3C. Matthew 11:2-11. December 15, 2019.**

John the Baptist, that wild man from the wilderness, came back to the city and found that the most dangerous beasts are the ones in soft robes in the palaces. This is always the case, of course, and John learned it when he criticized the ruler Herod for marrying his own sister in law. And so after he had prepared the way, preaching repentance and baptism, after he had baptized Jesus and begun to decrease, he finds himself in prison: isolated, threatened, done with the heart of his work. He won't get out and probably knows it. Herod is fascinated by him and comes down to talk with him for hours at a time, but Herod's wife isn't content with having him imprisoned and is plotting how to get her husband's captive pet killed.

John has done his work and now, imprisoned, he can do nothing but sit and wait, in a dark advent, for something that cannot feel very much like salvation. He hears mixed reports trickling in from Galilee—Jesus is at work, there is a lot of talk about the kingdom of heaven, but the Romans and their client kings are still in charge and no one seems that bothered that the forerunner is wilting away in prison for telling the truth. If this is the kingdom of heaven, then why is John in prison? And if it isn't, then to what did John give his life?

Perhaps none of us have been quite where John is: imprisoned by a lecherous ruler for telling him not to commit incest. It's a pretty specific situation. Maybe we've come closer to putting ourselves in some danger by insisting that rulers are not immune to the claims of morality and the reign of God. But whether we've actually gone to prison or not, we have all felt a bit like John the Baptist. When our part in some great project or work is drawing to a close, and we look out with something less than certainty at where the work stands. I think it's one of the most poignant moments in the gospel—John is the cousin and forerunner of Jesus, who baptized him in the Jordan and announced that Jesus was the awaited one; a man of such certainty that he was able to live a radically strange life and face down religious leaders and then finally the political leaders, too—and now this man alone is no longer so certain of the work to which he gave his life.

For us it might be something like the end of a career that we cared deeply about, but that hasn't gone the way we had planned in our first heady days on the job. Or a phase of our family life, whether it's raising kids or caring for our parents or the end of a long relationship. Or some work in the world or the church where we had placed our hope, had tried to take our place in work that moved the world toward wholeness. I'm sure we've all felt it, the doubt that is always the shadow of decision.

John's question, his doubt and hope, are specifically about the coming of the kingdom of heaven and the identity of Jesus. When John's friends ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another," Jesus doesn't answer them directly. He says instead: look around, listen, pay attention to what is going on. He does not say, yeah it's me, everyone can relax now. He says look around. And what they'll see when they look around is a pretty succinct summary of the coming of the kingdom of God: 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. The

place and time where these things happen, literally or metaphorically, is the kingdom of God, and the man from Galilee who is bringing them about is the Christ who is coming into the world.

John looks around and sees corrupt politicians, cruelty winning the day, and his own misfortune. He looks around and sees little reason to trust his hope, and I don't even have the heart to blame him for it. I've been there, and I think you probably have been, too. Jesus points John's disciples to the place where they can look around and see the work of the kingdom of God. John is not wrong to see the evil that is closing him in; but that evil cannot prevent the drawing near of the kingdom of God. We are not wrong when we see that the world is out of joint; but we are wrong when we think that means that God is absent or asleep.

The kingdom of God comes when the truth is seen and heard, when any of us damaged people revel in our God-given abilities, when we believe that love heals, when new life quickens along the dusty old hallways of the world, when the poor refuse to give up hope. The kingdom of God is not always what we were looking for, which is maybe most often victory over our enemies and comfort for ourselves. But when we look at it, there is no mistaking it. God does not end all evil yet, but God also never stops bringing forth good: making glad the wilderness and the dry land, turning burning sands into pools, making roads that not even fools can lose.

When we look, we can see the joyful coming near of the kingdom of God. But Jesus' instructions to John's disciples don't end with "look around." He neither answers their question directly, nor is satisfied with convincing just them. He tells them first to look around and then to GO and TELL. We know that not everyone can see the blossoming of the desert, because we ourselves have been among the ones who cannot see. We live in a world of Herods and of Johns. Of the wicked who have given themselves over to the pettiness of power and acclamation, but also of the good whose hope is shaken like a reed in the wind. We, who have seen the light coming into the world (however imperfectly), are called likewise to go and tell. To tell a hurting and cynical world that God is calling new life out of the grave, that there is good news for the poor, that the God who came to the world in a manger is coming still, and will come again. Amen.