

The Third Sunday in Advent            Isa. 35            I Cor. 4            Matt. 11:2-9

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen+

Do you ever think about the odd and often amusing phrases we use in everyday chatter? Let me give you a cursory string that are tossed about with some regularity. “Beyond a shadow of a doubt...Give them the benefit of a doubt...I doubt it...A child is an island of curiosity surrounded by a sea of questions marks...It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than open your mouth and remove all doubt...Doubt is the beginning not the end of wisdom.” Just what is this activity we call, doubt? What role does it play in the life of faith? Is it reluctance, suspicion, or might it be seeking after what is true?

There is a bit of dissonance in the fact that today, the Third Sunday in Advent is referred to as ‘Gaudete’ Sunday, meaning to ‘Rejoice’. Yet the Gospel starts us out with John the Baptist trapped in prison and perhaps in his uncertainty about his own cousin. Next Sunday we will hear John sally forth about the coming One, whose sandals he is not worthy to untie, and who is the hope of the world, and the Epistle will begin with ‘rejoice’. We have heard him proclaim that his cousin is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”, but today we hear a searching question from the man sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. “Are you the one to come, OR should we look for another?” (The early church Fathers suggest it was for his disciples that he asked the question, but nevertheless it stands.) i.e. should we seek someone different from what we see—should we seek elsewhere after someone to fulfill our hopes and deepest needs??? It is a potent question made all the more so coming from John who has seen and heard Jesus, yet he wonders about what he sees. Here he sits waiting; waiting in a hostile and manipulated world for a resolution to his longings. Waiting! It may be that we receive this reading from Matthew as a gift and invitation to ask—Who are we looking and waiting for to make life whole in a world where there is more snake oil being sold than can be purchased? Who is Jesus? Who is this whose words and life have led countless people, including us, to alter the course and direction of life, and become what we could not imagine without him?

This time of Advent has many hues and moods—joy, judgment, hope, longing, but a crucial next step is a time of watchful waiting. It is about not knowing fully what is coming tomorrow, or next week, BUT that whatever is coming will be for our growth in faith and ultimate salvation. Advent will not let us avoid waiting on God, for in waiting we remain in this moment, becoming more aware of Jesus, and that we are being prepared for the future God will bring us. So, John, and we as well, are waiting, and likely wondering, “Jesus, what are you up to in this world, and in my life?” What can we expect you to bring? It is possible that St. John of the Cross, whose feast will be tomorrow, points us forward. He suggests that this time is when we become more and more clear about our attachments, and whether we are fixated on what is temporal and what we expect which leaves us ever hungering, or on what pours life and hope and eternity into our souls and through us to our neighbors.

Do you know what you are looking for at this particular moment in your life? John’s disciples ask his question and don’t get a direct response. Have you ever noticed that Jesus often deflects questions by asking questions? He seems to respond in a way that demands participation by the inquirer. Jesus’ answer, what do you see, reminds me of an event my father told us about many years ago. He was living in north middle Tennessee, making a pastoral visit, and crossed over into

Kentucky to the small town of Guthrie. It is a little burg not unlike many in that part of the country—quaint with well kept homes, a local café, and of course the area general store. It is the kind where you can get everything from local produce and slab bacon to bibbed overalls, sizes triple zero to 60, and of course, feed and grain in the back. It could be suggested that if they don’t have it, then you don’t need it. My father stopped in to browse when he spotted someone, he thought he recognized. It was his first cousin, Jimmy, blonde hair, blue eyes, and all. They had grown up together. (Their fathers were brothers, their mothers, sisters.) Dad said he spoke to him and asked what he was doing all the way up here, and the man said, “I always buy feed here.” “Well, I wished I had known you were coming up. We could have had lunch.” At last the man asked, “Mister, who do you think I am?” Dad responded, “Aren’t you Jimmy Menees?” and the man said, “Yes, I am, but I don’t recognize you.” It turned out he was from a branch of our family that had moved to Kentucky over a century earlier. He looked like what my father expected, so that is what he saw.

Jesus does not offer a proof or a claim or ask them what they want to see but tells John’s disciples and us to hear and witness what is being wrought in the world by God. This is not a philosophical discussion about checking out evidence. It harkens to the OT reading in MP—Isaiah 35. The reign of God will look like this explosion of unexpected healing and restoration. If you have ever spent any time in the desert Southwest the first thing that strikes an Easterner is how many shades of brown there are!! Even Crayola cannot come up with that many crayons. It has the feel of dryness and lifelessness about it...until it rains. And then the desert explodes with life. This is what the coming of the Messiah looks like; life where it hasn’t been before.

“Are you the One to come...?” This hangs around us today. Jesus’ answer, like much of Scripture is multi-valent and full of texture. What do you hear and see; the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them. What must those words have recalled for John’s disciples? And just as critically, what do they bring to our recollection and to what do they call us as we wait and review our own lives?

The physical is intimately linked with the spiritual and the deep soul within us.

The blind see; to be blind is to be unable to journey or to find a way through the simplest places. But once we see clearly, we know-how and who to follow. The lame walk; There are multiple ways of being lame. We speak of “lame ducks” and “lame excuses”. It is sloth—being stuck and unable to move beyond the immediate, and perhaps being stuck in habitual self-defeating behaviors. We cannot get to what matters. The deaf hear (I’m waiting); Ephphatha—Be opened. Spiritual deafness is when we cannot listen to the voice that will bring clarity and calm amidst the confusion of life. Too many attachments cloud out what we need to hear most! And, the dead are made alive. The little girl at death healed; the son of the widow of Nain, and Lazarus. Death is what happens when our sin and guilt strangle the life of God’s love out of us and leave us as mere shells of what He has created in us.

Now, what do you hear and see? What signals individually and corporately are seen in our Advent waiting of the Messiah among us? The Collect and Epistle today call us to open our eyes to the gifts God has prepared and offered us in and through the Church as the very signs of who Jesus is today. Just as the prophet was not fully understood in his day, and just as John found a time of confusion and disorientation about Jesus Messiah, so there is a hidden aspect to our journey as well. Our physical nature matters to God and thus God uses that to get into our souls. To the

casual observer the gifts of grace may seem trivial. The water and oil of Baptism initiate and claim us back from brokenness; wine and bread sustain and renew, because they usher us into the very life of the Messiah; confession renews and gives new possibilities where sin has robbed us of our hope and future and it unweighs the darkness of the soul. The Apostolic ministry of the whole of the Church is itself nothing more or less than a signpost of the One who is coming upon the world to bring it life.

A couple of years or so ago the cellphone rang one day and caller id posted an unrecognized number. It nearly went untended, but some twinge led it to be answered. It turned out to be the daughter of a resident I had come to know well and appreciate, who was now rapidly declining. She was a teacher, artist, and person with a soul that was bent on caring for others. She had requested a visit, and if possible, an anointing and blessing at this closing moment of life. That we gathered, talked, laughed, pondered, and prayed. I pulled the Viaticum out, along with the Prayer Book and we all gathered around the Sacrament of unction at bed. At the close the daughter asked to talk for a moment outside the room and we exited. About 30-40 seconds later the brother, who had remained with his mother, came to the door and said, "I think she has passed". She had. It seemed such an odd timing, but he said, "I think she was just waiting to hear and receive the right word; a word that gave her release, hope, and assurance." It was who she was looking for.

"Are you the One to come, or should we look for another?" Look around, my friends in Christ. He is Enough. Amen+