

December 11, 2016 3rd Sunday of Advent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Matthew 11:1-11

Are You the One?

More John the Baptist this Sunday. We heard from John the Baptist in last Sunday's gospel, too. He's a characteristic Advent figure and last Sunday we heard from him from what is probably his most characteristic location: the wilderness. The place seems to go with his person, with how we usually think of what John the Baptist looks like, and sounds like. As we heard last week, as we hear every Advent, John the Baptist is the messenger, preparing the way in the wilderness. And he wears wild clothes, too, rough and ready garb: a camel's hair cloak and a leather belt, and he eats wild food: locusts, and honey, a diet earthy and uncooked. And, perhaps most striking of all, what John the Baptist says in the wilderness. We heard it last week, heard his most characteristic words, as raw and bold as anything else about him: Prepare! Be ready! Repent! All proclaimed, most certainly, with exclamation points.

John the Baptist is an Advent character because he sets the stage, gets everyone ready, prepares us for the coming of the Messiah. John the Baptist does this, as those earlier Advent readings show: preaching and baptizing with all the vigor and conviction of an outdoor revival.

And then today, just one week later, we hear another story of John the Baptist, from a very different location. He who once preached in a church without walls, with the rushing river his baptismal font, he who once looked up and saw a vault of a wide open sky, now looks up and sees a low, dark ceiling, growing closer every second. Today the messenger in the wilderness is locked in a prison cell. We don't know about his clothes now, but we can imagine them. No longer regularly immersed in and agitated by all those dunks in the Jordan, now his clothes hang dank and grey, hang off his body, a body once vigorous, now wasting away, on a prison diet. But perhaps the greatest difference, the greatest contrast that happens between last and this Sunday's gospel comes not in where John the Baptist is, or what he looks like, but what he says. Today's proclamation from John the Baptist ends not with an exclamation point, but with a question mark. "Are you the one?" From bold announcement to unsure question: "Are you the one?" A remarkable question, from John the Baptist.

And from us—we too ask this question, in ways large and small, we ask: "Are you the one?" Sometimes we ask this question of incredibly trivial things. "Are you the one?" we may ask, as we shop for an item of clothing: that special dress, the right shoes, as we pick out a Christmas tree. "Are you the one?" At least in my case, the triviality of the object does not mitigate the amount of time and feeling invested in the question. But we also ask it of less trivial things. "Are you the one," we ask, as we investigate things of long term consequence: the house, the place we will live; the schools our children will attend; the job, the career we are pursuing; the person with whom we will share our life. "Are you the one?"

We can identify with the question John the Baptist asks. Perhaps we most identify with it, when we ask it from locations like the one from which he asks it: when we ask it from places that feels like prison. "Are you the one?" we ask, when the job is closing in around us, when every time you enter that place of work a door clangs shut inside of you. "Are you the one?" we ask, wondering about a relationship that feel like it is wasting away—wasting us away. "Are you the one?" we ask, not even sure that anyone is listening, directing it above, if this is where faith gets you, what's the point? If there is a God why is the world is like it is? "Are you the one?"

This too, is a characteristic of Advent, this question, this location, this experience. It's why we have this gospel, today. Getting ready for Christmas includes this as well: our uncertainty, our pain, our imprisonment, our grief. This is the inescapable truth about which Christmas commercials try to lie. Getting ready for Christmas also makes you sad. Anyone who's lived a little knows this. I think anyone who's only lived a little, knows this, too. I think of a memory of my younger sister, one Christmas way back when we were very little, we were getting ready for Christmas, getting all dressed up for Christmas Eve, and she was crying. There wasn't any particular reason—other than what she knew, even in her tiny person, amidst all the hoopla she had also this intense longing, and not knowing, an inexplicable and very real sadness. Children cry around Christmas for any number of reasons, and this one too: because they are in touch with, not just the raw excitement but also with the sorrow. A worshiper recently asked me about the colors of the Advent wreath, he remembered a time they weren't the color they are now. Maybe you also remember that. There are various official liturgical explanations for the change in color to what we have now, but I would add one unofficial one: that this is also a season when we feel blue. This is also a season when we feel unsure that what we are preparing for will be what we hoped.

“Are you the one?” John the Baptist asks. John the Baptist asks this question, to Jesus, The One. That this question is even recorded in the Biblical record reflects the immense capacity of faith to include uncertainty. That this story is also part of the story of John the Baptist says something remarkable about religious experience and its variety—even by and within the very same person. That this scene and location is included as the reading for this Sunday recognizes the contrasting territory that Christian belief and life will include, wildly inexplicable and real as a prison cell. Being one who prepares the way for the Messiah, being in Advent does not mean always being in a happy place. It includes doubt and despair, times of intense questioning of the very thing for which you so intensely seek. You can ask that question. John the Baptist, the messenger sent to prepare the way, asked that question. And Jesus does not berate him, or shame him, for asking it. After responding to his question, speaking to others about John the Baptist, Jesus exuberantly praises him. Jesus doesn't denounce the question, “Are you the one?”

Neither does he answer the question. Not directly. As you'll recall, even the mechanism of the conversation, the way it takes place, is indirect. Jesus is not speaking directly to John the Baptist, but to him through others. It's an indirect answer. So also is the answer itself. When asked, “Are you the one?” Jesus does not say “Yes!” Jesus says, through other messengers, “Go and tell John what you see and hear.” Jesus does not say, “I'm going to take away all uncertainty.” Jesus says, to other messengers, to all who would be messengers, “Here is the evidence: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk.” Jesus says, “Here is the evidence, all around you—but you have to answer the question.” The responsibility for faith, the ownership of it, the announcement of it, depends upon us.

That's how fragile, and how powerful, and how personal the life of faith is, so perfectly characterized in the person of John the Baptist. From the banks of the Jordan and from the prison cell, too, preparing a way. Among those born of women, no one rose greater. So also, and even greater, the least of us.