

Sermon – December 11, 2022
“Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 11:2-11

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts anew, and anoint the sharing of these words. May they bless your people, transform us into Christ's image, and guide us to fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning. In just a few short days, we will be celebrating the arrival of the Christ child! In this season of anticipation, Advent, we spend the days looking forward to not only the coming of Jesus, God incarnate, God in the flesh, but also looking forward to the gift his life brings to us, salvation. As we celebrate Jesus' coming and the great joy we have in his arrival, we exchange gifts to share our joy with each other in this season. Kay and I have a small gift for you this year. Please take one for each family and enjoy learning more about the idea of going on to perfection. As a church, we have begun to celebrate the arrival of the Christ child in many ways as we come together for table fellowship, held a party that celebrates Jesus' birthday with children, put out decorations that remind us of the season, and extend multiple expressions of Jesus' love for one another. The hours of sunlight may be short, but the light of the coming son is beginning to shine all around us.

The herald of the coming one, John the Baptist, has moved from the wilderness to a dungeon in King Herod's fortress. John's message of repentance that drew so many out into the wilderness has been heard by Herod and it was not well received. John is now in cruel bondage hoping for freedom, looking for someone to come and open the doors of the dungeon and set him free. As John sits in Herod's dungeon, he has time to consider the events of his ministry to Israel and his role as a herald to the coming one. As John thinks about his ministry, news comes to

him about Jesus' ongoing activities in the towns of Galilee. While Matthew does not share with us John's thoughts in response to the news about Jesus, Matthew does tell us that a question forms in John's mind about Jesus. John summons some of his disciples who are caring for him in the dungeon and sends them to Jesus with a question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"¹ John has heralded the coming one and declared Jesus to be the one who is to come, the Lamb of God. But as John sits in the dungeon pondering Jesus' work, he may be thinking that what Jesus is doing lacks a key aspect of what he heralded, the coming judgment of God. John seems to be expecting Jesus to act soon as a judge to remove the wicked, and so John summons his disciples and tasks them to find Jesus and ask his question.

The task given to John's disciples is not an easy task as Jesus is some 100 miles away from where John is in bondage. But John's disciples are faithful, make the journey, and find Jesus ministering to a crowd of people. They ask Jesus John's question and wait for Jesus' response. Now, in the majority of the action movies being made today that I have seen, such a request from an oppressed friend would result in the assembly of a small strategic team of disciples led by Jesus who would all set out to engage in an impossible attempt to rescue John. The movie would include dramatic battles as this small group eliminates all of Herod's highly trained and armed troops. It would include the removal of Herod from power, John being freed from the dungeon, and a spectacular scene in which Herod's fortress is destroyed in a series of explosions and a great fireball. The action movie would end with John free in the wilderness once again feasting on locusts and wild honey and Jesus' small team sitting around a table and sharing about their exploits. Let me make it clear that is not what happens in the scripture. In scripture, John's disciples find Jesus and ask him John's question, a question that marks the first in a series of related, increasingly hostile questions that will culminate with Jesus' death on the cross. The question that John has sent foreshadows the questions the leaders of Israel will ask about and to Jesus that will end with his death.

When Jesus hears John's question, he responds by summarizing a large amount of Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah, telling them the blind are receiving their sight, the lame are walking, the deaf are hearing, the dead are being raised, and the poor are receiving good news. Notice Jesus' list of prophecies that he is fulfilling in his ministry lacks any idea of judgment. He does not address judgment, but leaves it as an open, future possibility. Jesus does not directly answer John's question verifying that he is the "one to come" and there is no need to wait for

another. A first glance at Jesus' list reveals an impressive array of healing and restoring actions. If we will review Isaiah's prophetic words, we will come to the realization that Jesus, by describing what he is doing, is telling John's disciples that the "messianic age of blessing has arrived."ⁱⁱ Jesus' answer holds that by doing these things, he is fulfilling prophetic expectations that are associated with God and the end of the present age or time as we know it, and the beginning of the return of God's reign on earth has come or is breaking in. Jesus' answer to this question suggests very strongly that he has come in the place of God [and is] performing the work of God."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus' answer to John's disciples' question is a claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the coming one, and affirms that the kingdom of heaven has come near and is in breaking. If we study the text from Isaiah's prophecy, we will discover that Jesus makes a very subtle claim that he is doing the things that God has said through the prophet Isaiah that God will do before He returns. Jesus makes the claim in his answer to John that the works he is doing testify to the arrival of the Messiah and therefore the kingdom of heaven has come near. Whether John's disciples grasp the meaning in Jesus' response is not clear, but they do leave with Jesus' reply and return to John.

Jesus then turns to the crowd and begins to talk with them about John, affirming John's role in God's plan of salvation. He starts by asking the crowds, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken in the wind?"^{iv} Jesus' point is not that reeds move easily in the breezes, bending to the changing winds, but that John was not one who was easily shaken in the changing winds of Israel. John was not one to test the winds of culture to refine and change his message. John was one who received the word of God and boldly shared it with the people of Israel who came to hear the message he had been given. John has stood strong in the winds of the culture, even to the point of being jailed in Herod's fortress for speaking truth to power.

Jesus asks the crowds another question about John. "What did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes?" John wore camel hair garments and feasted on locust and wild honey, not the delicacies of a royal house. Jesus is pointing out that John was not a yes man to be found among the courtiers of Herod. John was a voice calling out in the wilderness with a message not popular in the culture but a message that was heard and responded to by large numbers of people, who in response repented of their sin and by doing so paved the way for the coming one, the one who is now restoring the sight of the blind, restoring hearing for the deaf, raising the dead, and bringing good news to the poor.

Jesus continues to affirm John's role to the crowd as the one who goes ahead of the Messiah and prepares the way for the Messiah's coming. Jesus gives John great praise saying, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."^v When we hear this statement, we need to stop and sort out what Jesus is speaking about. Jesus is pointing to a dividing line between two eras. The first is described as the era of those "born of women" and the second is the era of those who are reborn into the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom that Jesus preaches and teaches is a kingdom that has now, since his arrival, come close. John is the prophet who has appeared at the time of the dividing line between these two eras. All of those who spoke the word of God before John were connected to God through the Law. All after John who are the citizens of the kingdom of heaven will be connected to God through Jesus' shed blood, death on the cross, and resurrection. Jesus confirms John as the prophet who stands between two eras, the era of promise and the era of fulfillment. John's greatness doesn't stem from his speaking the words of God, but from his identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the Lamb of God. John is the messenger who speaks to the arrival of the coming one. Think of John as being a messenger for God, as angels are messengers, one who brings God's message of the coming near of the kingdom of heaven to God's people.

Think about the difference in these two eras spiritually. John is filled with the Spirit in his mother's womb and, as an adult, boldly speaks the message given to him by the Spirit. By contrast, though, all in the kingdom of heaven have Holy Spirit in their hearts through the salvation plan that Jesus fulfills by doing the will of the Father. We, those who have believed in Jesus Christ as our Lord and savior, have received Holy Spirit in abundance. As such, we can be greater than those who sought righteousness through the Law if we will receive this gift. John is the last and greatest of those born of women. Jesus is the first of those in the kingdom of heaven, and we who believe in Jesus are citizens of this kingdom, reborn into the kingdom of heaven.

As citizens, we are also to be those who exhibit some of the attributes Jesus points out that John has. Even as the least in the heavenly kingdom, citizens of this kingdom are greater than John. Greatness means that we will have the same strengths John has but in fuller measure. We, like John, are not to be shaken by the winds of the culture, allowing ourselves to be bent by even light breezes that blow as new false truths in our culture. We are to be those who hold to the truth given to us in the Holy Scriptures empowered by Holy Spirit even if that position is

difficult, even if holding it brings persecution, even if holding it means we are to be locked in a dungeon in cruel bondage and begin to wonder when the judgment aspects of the kingdom will begin. John stood in the wilderness and boldly proclaimed God's word and people heard his cry, repented, and Messiah came. Imagine the impact that Christians will have when we also come to the wilderness, repent, and then stand up and lovingly proclaim the steadfast love of God?

Another trait we are to have in common with John, but in greater measure, is that we are to be bold messengers to the poor. The poor are those without Holy Spirit, those who do not know Jesus and as such are not in the kingdom of heaven. We are to be bold in our witness to those who are outside of the kingdom of heaven. We are not to go and scream at them, but to take the love of Jesus, a steadfast love, a love that will do the will of the Father and die on the cross that we might be reconciled to God, a love that brought us into the kingdom of heaven through rebirth that comes with belief in Jesus, and go to those who are poor in spirit and love them in this same manner.

As we work among those who are poor in spirit, we also may come to a time when we ask the same question of Jesus that John asks, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" We may see the ever-growing sin and darkness that we have been freed from by Jesus growing around us and wonder if Jesus will come again to judge the quick and the dead. But when we ask this question of Jesus, we will receive the same answer that John's disciples received, that Jesus is still at work in the world and that he did not come to judge the world, but to love those in the world, helping the blind to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, and those who are dead without Jesus to rise into new life as those reborn into the kingdom of heaven. We are to be those who are boldly going forth and bringing the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Pray with me: Jesus, give us hearts of love that are consistent with those in the kingdom of heaven and lead us out to work with you in your mission to all people, helping the blind to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, and those who are dead without you to rise into new life as those reborn into the kingdom of heaven. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

ⁱ NRSV Matthew 11:2-11

ⁱⁱ Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 413). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 413). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} NRSV

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