

Sermon – Third Sunday in Advent

Matthew 11: 2-11

Our gospel text this morning reveals to us John the Baptist for a second time. Last week's gospel reading if you recall was set in the desert and John was calling people to a baptism of repentance. John testified to those that went out to see him that he was not the Messiah, but rather the herald of the Messiah, the one who would prepare the way.

In the gospel excerpt this morning we find John in prison, a confined and dank space, and a far cry from the wide-open desert where his ministry started. John was a prophet and by their very nature, was no shrinking violet. Prophets proclaimed with great vigor the nature of God, and in John's case, proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. Prophets lived tough lives, often mocked, mistreated, jailed, beaten and killed because of their testimony.

John was in prison because of one such proclamation he made to King Herod. He told the king that he could not marry his sister-in-law Herodias as the king desired. For that he was arrested. His fearlessness resulted in his imprisonment, and in the end his death.

In prison, John was supported by his followers. No doubt they shuffled back and forth between the prison and the outside world carrying messages back and forth, and bringing in food and clothing for him. John knew that Jesus, his cousin and the man that he baptized, was in active ministry in the region but he seems not to be sure if Jesus was in fact the promised messiah.

John was curious about Jesus. "Are you the one that was to come," he asked through his disciples, "or is there someone else?" This was a question asked in anticipation that something long promised may in fact have come. The question is a perfect Advent question, which is why the passage has been selected as our gospel reading this morning. Advent is our time to be curious about God's work in ourselves and the world. It is a time of reflection.

It is comforting to know that even someone as connected to Jesus as John was, that he still had doubts about what he heard about Jesus and was curious for further confirmation. Sought of like an earlier version of the disciple Thomas who wasn't convinced about Jesus' resurrection until he could see and touch Jesus. Maybe we are a lot like John too if we are honest.

Jesus answered John's disciples' question by pointing to the work he had been doing, and to what these disciples had seen and heard from their own experience of being free to follow Jesus. The blind had indeed received sight. The lame had started to walk again. The lepers had been cured of their disease. Some of the dead had been raised and the poor had been comforted by the good news of Jesus Christ that had been revealed to them.

Jesus held John in the highest regard. He thought of him, and announced to the world, that John in fact was the greatest person that had been born of a woman. Despite Jesus' testimony

about John and his high regard for him, he did not try to rescue him. He did not go to Herod and argue for his release. Why not? It is a juicy theological question for another time.

John was left in prison and became the victim of state sanctioned violence. Herodias had an evil desire to rid the world of the man who was preventing her from marrying her king. John was beheaded after Herodias lured Herod into a trap by having him promise his daughter to grant her any wish she desired. John, like Jesus was killed by the state. Neither one of them was spared the suffering of a violent death.

We don't have to look far in today's world for those that are helplessly held captive and who long for freedom, and a savior to bring freedom about. I was intrigued by a PBS news story last week about prisoners in Maryland. The story focused on those prisoners who had been jailed as minors and given life sentences without parole. The Supreme Court eventually ruled that those sentences constituted 'cruel and unusual punishment' and parole needed to be offered. Despite the ruling these prisoners were still unable to get parole because their fate rested solely with the Governor.

The democratic Governor elected in 1994 supported 'truth in sentencing' and refused parole to everyone, including minors sentenced to life. In the twenty-five years before the election of the Governor 181 people had been paroled. In the 23 years since his election only 2 paroles have been granted. Today there are more than 300 men and women in this situation despite serving their sentences in exemplary fashion. Some have been incarcerated for 30 to 40 years.

The past Governor now admits the mistake but change has been slow to come. The attorney fighting for change says that for the prisoners, being granted parole is like 'winning the lottery.' They mostly wait in hope and hope was kindled by anyone who could offer freedom. They might ask of anyone trying to help them, are you the one? It's hard to imagine what life is like for them.

Similarly, many people are held captive in other situations. Women are held captive by abusive husbands. Men are held captive by addicted wives. Children are held captive by bullies and predators. Many are held captive by psychological and physical illnesses. Many still may feel captive caring for a loved one. Like John, those held captive in today's society long, I'm sure, for release, long for a day when someone will come to free them from all that holds them captive and all that makes them feel powerless.

As John languished in prison, cared for by his followers, he must have received messages from them that Jesus was indeed the One, the promised Messiah. We can imagine his disciples excitedly telling him about what they saw and what they heard about the ministry of Jesus.

We can also imagine a sense of consolation that John might have felt, knowing that his work was done and that Jesus would take care of the rest. He probably heaved a heavy sigh of relief

and exhaled all his anxiety. His spirit would have been refreshed and his inner strength renewed so that he could endure his further incarceration.

At the outset of this Advent season we reflected upon the fact that we live in the tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet.' The 'already' is the revelation of God through the ages, through Abraham and Moses, through his prophets and not least through God incarnate, Jesus Christ. The 'not-yet' is all that lies before us, a world that is to be shaped by you and by me, by our church and by so much that is out of our control.

As Advent is a time of reflection we might ask ourselves what aspects of our lives holds us captive and where might we be able to shape the world. When the things that keep us captive are identified, and I dare say that we all have something that keeps us captive to a degree, we might reflect on the Advent question of John. Are you, Jesus, the one who is coming again, and are we ready? We might also look for signs of God's action in the world about us. What do we see and what do we hear that gives us hope that our own freedom is close at hand, despite all that might be weighing on us in the present.

For those held captive by addiction freedom might be that first of the twelve AA steps, that is acknowledging the problem has become unmanageable and the powerlessness to manage recovery on one's own. For those held captive in abusive relationships, freedom might come from telling someone about the abuse and seeking help. For our children that might be experiencing being bullied, freedom might come from telling a parent, grandparent or teacher. Just as the grace of God frees us from captivity to sin, so God will give us the tools to free us from other forms of captivity.

Our lives of faith are not promised to us as free of captivity, free of fear or free of judgement by others. However, Jesus did promise us salvation and did promise us forgiveness from all that weighs us down. Jesus promised never to overload us and always to be there to carry our burdens if we only confide in him through our prayers and our longings.

Patience is a virtue we need in times of uncertainty, just as James mentions in today's Epistle reading. The prophets he says, provide us great examples for how to endure life. Jesus loved John, considering him the greatest of all people. John was patient as he waited for his freedom. Jesus ensured John knew that the Messiah had indeed come, hopefully reducing John's anxiety and enabling him to persevere as he waited.

Jesus loves us even more than John he says. Jesus said that despite John's considerable greatness, he was still considered lower than the least in the kingdom of heaven. In our Advent quiet time we might reflect on how we experience God's love for us at this moment in our lives. This third Sunday in Advent reminds us of the comfort of knowing that even as we live in the tension between the 'already' and the 'not-yet,' we can still find hope that whatever is holding us captive can be endured and can eventually be overcome.

Jesus loves us deeply. His love for each one of us, and the love we have for those around us, are all examples of God's action in the world, God's revelation to us. God will set us free and we can be assured that one day we will transition into the life to come, where we will be totally free from all captivity, free from all suffering and totally bathed in the light and love of Jesus Christ.

Amen