

**St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)**  
**Third Sunday of Advent – December 17, 2023**  
**Matthew 11:2-11 – Are You the One?**  
**Rev Peter Wagner**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

Whenever John the Baptist was asked about his ministry, he answered by quoting Isaiah 40. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord." Prepare the way of the great Coming One. Call the world to repentance. Soften stubborn hearts, remove every obstacle. "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low." John was sent to point us to the true, living Word of God, the One who stands forever. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

But Isaiah 40 has a lot more comfort than John ever preached. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." That does not sound like a John the Baptist sermon. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." This is not John. Nor is this: "He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

John's sermons to the crowd on the banks of the Jordan sounded more like this:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

That was the original Advent sermon. No comfort. Pure and terrible law, to shake the foundations of apathy, to bring people to their knees. John is calling sinners to repentance without holding back, because their mighty God is at the gates.

And John's preaching worked. It cut many to the heart, to confess their sins and plead for God's mercy. John made them ready, a people prepared in repentance for the mighty One to come.

May John's terrible warning pierce us all to the heart. May pastors today have the courage to preach it still. May we all awake from our apathy, confess our sin, and plead to God for mercy, lest he come in wrath. Lest Jesus find us going through the motions of Christianity without true repentance, without changing our way of life. Repent now, for the hour is very late! The axe is far nearer to the root of the tree than ever before.

But preaching such law must have been crushing for John. It must have brought him nearly to despair. Surely he longed to speak the full gospel, but he never got such joy. He only preached half of Isaiah 40, the hard half. This was John's cross to bear.

And yes, John did preach the beginning of the gospel. He bore witness to Christ. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." This is what all the prophets longed to proclaim. It made him greater than any prophet that came before. For John was the first to point to Jesus. "Here he is! This is the one! The one the prophets foretold, the one the patriarchs longed to see, here is your mighty God, in the flesh!"

And yet John did not live to see the ministry of Jesus fulfilled. He never saw the cross or Easter. He never got to announce the triumph of Christ, or preach the full gospel.

Not only did John preach mainly law, but he suffered for it. He went to prison for confronting Herod about his brother's wife. And languishing there in prison, knowing he would probably die, doubt crept in. Had his ministry been for nothing? Had anyone believed his message? And what about Jesus? Was this the Messiah after all? Jesus was not behaving as John expected. Where were the fire and axe and winnowing fork? No wrath, no sudden destruction. Jesus came in humility and compassion. Instead of chopping down the tree, Jesus came with patient mercy, to nourish it. He came to suffer in love, for the dead stump of his people. To make a green shoot spring up in their place. Where was the outstretched arm? Where was the recompense of God?

So John wondered about Jesus, "Are you the one, or not?" He needed assurance. Had his preaching been in vain? Not only did John never get to preach comfort, he needed comfort himself.

None of us are immune to these thoughts. However confident a pastor may seem, however great a preacher, none are free from doubt. Like all men, they get discouraged. Are you the one, Jesus, or not? Why do so few believe, why is the church declining, if you are really the Messiah? Is the Christian faith true? Is our trust in you misplaced? Is our preaching in vain. No one today has seen Jesus in his full glory, we only hear of him as

a man. Are you really the one?

When doubt creeps in, it's tempting for us all, pastors and congregations alike, to look for more attractive ways to present the gospel. More enthusiastic music, more engaging programs. We want to tone down the law, so no one is offended. And we wish Jesus would do some great miracle, or powerfully answer prayer, so everyone would know the truth. Something to prove, once and for all, that he is the one, that our message is worthwhile.

But in our doubt, we must turn, like John, not to human ideas, but to the right place for assurance. To the works of Jesus. For Jesus is the one. He is the only true preacher of the gospel. He preaches perfect comfort by his whole life, everything he does and says.

Even in his doubt, John turned to the right place. He sent word to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered with powerful proof. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."

This is true assurance, perfect proof. What comfort to know our Savior's mighty miracles. Far greater than John, Jesus alone has power over all doubt, all suffering. He preaches pure gospel, perfect comfort. He who endured the cross gives endurance to take up our cross and follow him.

And the proof of Jesus, the proof that our faith is not in vain, is not found in human success or overflowing pews. The proof that Jesus is the mighty one of God is in his mighty works, to cleanse lepers, give sight to the blind, raise the dead, and proclaim the gospel.

But why don't we see his miracles today? Wouldn't it be wonderful if Jesus did a sign to prove himself now? Wouldn't that convince us, and everyone else, to believe once for all?

When we wish for these things, we are doubting that Scripture is enough, that Jesus is enough. It's comforting to remember that we are a lot like John the Baptist, who never saw the miracles of Jesus with his own eyes. By the time Jesus was healing the lame and blind and mute, making their tongues sing for joy, John was already in prison. He never saw the Lord. John only heard about it from eyewitnesses, the same way we hear. John had to trust the report of his disciples, just as we must trust the testimony of the eyewitness in the Bible, that Jesus is the one.

So Jesus says to us, as he said to John, "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me." Do not be offended that you see no great wonders today. Do not be offended that you have to trust Scripture that he is the one. Do not be disappointed by his cross, or when he comes without mighty fanfare, in ordinary means of grace. Do not be disappointed when he comes as a humble child, or when he comes in his humble word and sacrament, administered by a mere man. Blessed is he who recognizes the mighty God in these hidden things.

For even if we do not see the lame healed today, Jesus is doing a greater miracle here. The poor in spirit have the good news preached to them! And even if we do not see the blind and deaf being cured, Jesus is doing a greater miracle here. He opens the eyes of the spiritually blind to see him as God. He opens the ears of the spiritually deaf to hear his saving word!

What a joy it is to be a pastor, to herald this good news. What a privilege to preach everything that John longed to preach, the full gospel. John prepared the people for the Coming One; I get to proclaim his finished work. I get to announce the mighty God, veiled in humble flesh. I get to point to the child in the manger, the king on the cross, and the risen Lord, "Here he is!"

And what a magnificent thing it is for you to believe. How glorious to be a Christian, to trust the Scriptures, to believe the herald, to believe that Jesus comes now in the mysteries of his sacraments. The lowliest Christian who believes these things is far greater than John. Greater than any prophet or preacher. For the lowliest Christian has the mighty One, all his saving work, and all his comfort, whatever cross he must bear. The lowliest Christian belongs to the Good Shepherd, who takes you in his arms, and gently leads you home. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.