

WHEN DOUBT BECOMES A GIFT
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Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 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.

LAST WEEK IN THE gospel reading, we heard John the Baptist out in the wilderness yelling and screaming about the kingdom of heaven, and what was so striking about him was how supremely confident he was. There was not a shred of doubt in his mind that a new day was dawning, and when it arrived, the high and the mighty would fall, and the poor and the lowly would be vindicated.

In fact, he was so sure about it that he didn't care who he offended. When some leaders from the temple in Jerusalem showed up, instead of toning it down, which

would've been the smart thing to do, John called them a "brood of vipers" and told them their time was coming. "Even now," he said, "the axe is lying at the root of the trees."

So that was John last week: bold, fearless. But this week he's a completely different person. He's sitting in jail, full of doubt, wondering if he was wrong about everything. Because the one he thought was going to be Israel's savior hasn't been acting very savior-like.

John's been getting reports about Jesus, and he's not too excited about what he's been hearing. Instead of

stirring up the masses, Jesus has been wandering around healing people. Instead of leading the charge against the Romans, he's been going from town to town preaching. Which has John worried enough that he sends some of his followers to go ask Jesus point-blank: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" In other words: "Are you the guy or not?"

I feel sorry for John. The thing he has been waiting for hasn't materialized. The thing he has pinned all of his hopes on hasn't panned out. And now he's left holding the bag. He stuck his neck out proclaiming the kingdom to anyone who'd listen and look where it got him. It reminds me of churches that take a leap of faith, and put themselves out there, and try something new. But then whatever it is doesn't work out, and they start doubting themselves and wondering if it was all just a big mistake.

At my last church we spent months planning a spaghetti dinner as an outreach event. We thought it would be a great way to get some publicity for the church and maybe attract some new members. So, we turned the fellowship hall into a fancy restaurant. We had menus, candles, linen tablecloths, people serving as waiters—the whole nine yards. Then we invited the whole community, and maybe half a dozen people showed up.

We were so disappointed, and so discouraged. It was a total failure. Or was it? Maybe God was working through our efforts in ways we couldn't see. Maybe one or two of those people went home feeling cared for, and maybe that's just what they needed. The point being the effort that looks like a failure to us may in fact be how God's will is unfolding—which is exactly what turns out to be the case with John.

When his followers catch up with Jesus and ask if he's the guy, Jesus doesn't give them a simple yes or no answer. He says, "Go tell John what you see happening, and let him decide for himself." Then he lists all the outcomes of his ministry: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

And if you're sitting there thinking you've heard that somewhere before, it's because you have—in the first reading today, where Isaiah's talking about the day when God finally comes to save God's people. The eyes of the blind will be opened, he says, the ears of the deaf will be

unstopped, the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless will sing for joy.

So, it's not word-for-word, but there's definitely an echo. The answer Jesus gives definitely evokes this passage from Isaiah—and that's on purpose. Jesus is sending John a message. He's telling him he is fulfillment of Isaiah's vision. He is the one who's bringing this day of salvation. It's just that he's not doing it the way John thought he would—by raising an army and defeating the Romans and making Israel a powerful nation again. He's taking a very different approach that John's struggling with (and sometimes we struggle with, too.)

But think about it. When Jesus healed someone, what was really happening? He wasn't just fixing whatever ailment they had. He was restoring them to community. Because in that world, if you were blind or deaf or had leprosy, you were cut off—economically, socially, spiritually. You couldn't work. You couldn't worship. You were forgotten, invisible.

So, when Jesus healed someone, what he was really doing was saying: "This person belongs. This person matters. This person has dignity and value." And little by little, one life at a time, he was creating a new kind of community—one where the outcasts were welcomed, where the last were first, where love and mercy shaped everything.

That's the kingdom of heaven, and it doesn't happen through some kind of uprising that simply replaces one empire with another. It happens through a transformation of human hearts, and a re-ordering of human relationships, that starts small and grows from the inside out.

So, John may be a completely different person this week, but to be honest, I like him better this way. He's more human. He has doubts about Jesus, just like we do sometimes. He wants Jesus to do things his way, just like we do sometimes. And when Jesus does things his own way, he becomes disillusioned, just like we do sometimes. But as a friend of mine once told me, to be disillusioned is to have your illusions stripped away. And that can be a good thing. Doubt can be a gift. It can open our eyes to deeper understandings—just like it did for John.

After his followers leave to report back to him what Jesus said, Jesus tells his own followers that there has never been a greater prophet than John. He is the one God sent to prepare the way. And he did that, not by being right about everything, not by having all the answers, not by being supremely confident, but by being willing to question. By asking whether Jesus was the guy

or not, and by allowing Jesus to expand his understanding of what God's power looks like and what it means to be saved.

I think that's what Advent is really about—this season of waiting and wondering, when we're invited to bring our doubts and our questions, when we're challenged to let go of our expectations and open ourselves to a God who's always bigger and more generous than we ever imagined.

We come to Advent with our own ideas about who Jesus should be and what God should do. And Advent says: Let those illusions fall away. Make space for something greater. Prepare a way for Jesus in your hearts and minds.

Pray with me:

God of grace and truth, you welcome our questions, and you turn our doubts into gifts. Strip away our illusions about who you should be and what you should do. Open our eyes to see you as you really are—bigger and more generous than we ever imagined. Give us courage to let go of our small expectations and make room for your greater vision. Prepare a way in our hearts and minds for Jesus to enter in—not the Jesus of our own making, but the Jesus who transforms us, who heals us, who brings your kingdom one life at a time. In his name we pray.
Amen.