

Sermon Advent 3 2021

December 12, 2021

Matthew 11:2-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson which was previously read.

There is a theologian from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by the name of Paul Tillich who is noted for having said that doubt is a part of faith. While I would argue that he's wrong and that doubt is contrary to faith, the reality is that doubt is something all of us, even the most pious of us, experience. As a pastor, it's not as though I'm immune to hearing something and wondering how that fits into the description of the God we know in Jesus. It's something that the sinful nature in us won't let go, but that the new creation in us, the Christian in us, thankfully is overcome in our life in Christ. But as we know, we are always saints and sinners until our death and we become just saints. This is true for every believer.

In our Gospel lesson, it appears that even the great John the Baptist is experiencing his own doubt as this saint/sinner. He sends to Jesus via his disciples and says, "**Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?**" Now, to be fair, within the history of the Church, there have been many who have said that John isn't doubting here. Instead, he's just pointing his disciples to Jesus that they would follow him. They say he's doing just what he did when he pointed to Jesus in John's gospel as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

And as they say this, there is logic to that idea. After all, John did see the dove descend on Jesus at Jesus' baptism. He heard the Father speak of Jesus as His beloved. John surely heard the story of when Mary came to visit John's mother Elizabeth while John was still in the womb, and he leapt in that womb because Mary was pregnant with this Jesus. If anyone would know if Jesus was the Messiah, "the One who is to come," as he put it, it would be John, wouldn't it? But, it's also not as though doubt creeping into the lives of those who have witnessed great things is unheard of in the Bible. Think of Abraham who saw the Covenant fulfilled by the flaming torch as the Lord promised Abraham He would bless him with a son. And yet Abraham took matters into his own hands, and slept with Hagar to produce Ishmael, before the miraculous birth of Isaac. Or think about the Israelites who witnessed the pillar of fire lead them through the parted waters of the Red Sea. They shouldn't have doubted, but they did. They doubted and they grumbled. Or think even of John's own

father, Zechariah. Here the angel of the Lord Gabriel was standing before him in the Holy Place, telling Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have John. Zechariah was witnessing a miracle right before his eyes, and what was his response? **“How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”** An angel standing before him wasn’t enough to disperse his doubt? And so, we see a pattern that would be logical even for John to fit into.

And yet, if you’re like me there’s something comforting about the thought that the Baptist had doubt. If you have those moments where you question the reality of all of this, you question the reality of Jesus, you question the goodness of God Himself, you too can realte.

If you would indulge me to reference the “Rise and Fall of Mars Hill” podcast I’ve been listening to again, I was thinking about this in conjunction with that. As I have mentioned, the podcast is telling the story of the meteoric rise of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington. The church exploded in size from the late 90’s until its dissolution in 2014. This small startup rallied around the personality of its pastor, Mark Driscoll, and peaked somewhere around 15,000 people, I believe, before it started to unravel. I’m listening to the portion of the story which is being called “The Aftermath.” The reporter is describing how people’s lives were affected after this church that they had poured blood, sweat, and tears into crumbled to pieces in almost no time in a fall filled with scandal and abuse of power. One of the noted effects the reporter described was how many people left and have fallen from the faith altogether in light of this.

I think that’s relatable, isn’t it? In fact, I’ve heard that with some regularity that people have experienced the deep sinfulness that still clings to us even in the church and they are brought to a doubt that overtakes their faith and so they stop believing. And this seems to be all the more the case if the offense is at the hands of the pastor. Of course, that makes sense as the pastor is to be exemplary because if he isn’t the message could be tied to his untrustworthiness. And look at the scandals that have rocked the church. You have famous pastors caught in embezzlement. You have famous pastors caught in sex scandals. You have the whole Roman Catholic Church being embroiled in their scandal of sex abuse and coverup. When the Church is supposed to be the light of the world, and she falls, it’s no shock that doubts and unbelief arise in conjunction with that.

And of course, that’s not to mention the things we see in the world. As we look around, we see all of the suffering that goes on around us. I can’t help but think of the

tornados that struck Kentucky overnight Friday night; all of that devastation and destruction. So many people killed. And we see those sorts of things all around us. They're not one-time things. And so, all of this leads us to question. It leads us to not understand at best, and to doubt and despair at worst.

So, what do we do, then with this doubt? Hear again how Jesus addresses it with John **“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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”** What does He tell John? He says look at the promises you see fulfilled in me. Look at what God has said He would do through the prophet Isaiah—because that's actually where a lot of this comes from that Jesus talks about: the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, lepers cleansed, etc., so much of that imagery is from Isaiah. And Jesus says, “Look. You see this promise coming true right before your eyes and ears.” And He says, “And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

I think that's important to take in. It's all important to take in. It's important to take in the fact that Jesus is this One who is to come. Of course, that's what we're celebrating in the season of Advent. We're celebrating that Jesus comes and that He brings redemption for His people. We're celebrating that He came as God with us in that first Christmas. And it's important to see how He proved who He was at that coming. It's important to see how He showed Himself to be God in the flesh overcoming the sad and dark consequences of sin. But it's important to hear the blessing for those not offended by Him.

What do we mean by that? Well, simply put, it's important that we not be offended by how He decides to go about working things. For example, there were those who heard and saw Jesus that were finally offended that He confessed Himself as God's Son, and so they put Him death. There were those who didn't like the way Jesus answered some of their questions so they walked away in unbelief. There were most of all those who didn't like the kind of king Jesus showed Himself to be when He hanged on a cross seemingly powerless.

And if we're honest, that might be where our own doubts and offenses come into play too. Just like Jesus didn't heal all those around Him in His earthly ministry, He still doesn't today. Just like He didn't bring about a perfect Utopia in His earthly ministry, we still wrestle with sin, our own, and those who sin against us. We still wrestle with sorrow and grief and death. In human terms it's no wonder we doubt.

But that's where this word to John teaches us too. Blessed are you when you are not offended. Blessed are you when you look to the works of Jesus and don't look at the things around. Think about the story of Peter walking on water. There are the waves and the wind, and Peter has been walking toward Jesus just fine, but those things distract him, and he starts to sink.

So also you. Look at Jesus. Look at this One nailed to the cross for you. Yes you struggle now just like He experienced the worst of struggle on the cross. But know that He is on that cross for you, that He suffers not only with you in this world, but even taken your place under the curse of death. And why? That all of it would be overcome in His resurrection. That's what those healings showed: the deaf hearing, the blind seeing, the dead being raised: they all showed that this Jesus was coming to bring them to their end. And while we still experience those sorrows and sufferings now, they are ended in the resurrection of Jesus. Look to Him and see that.

Of course, that doesn't mean we pretend like they're not happening, or we minimize them, but rather than being drawn into the black hole with them, we see that this One who is to come has taken us out and rescued us. And when that doubt is particularly strong—which is always stronger than we'd like to admit—look to how Jesus brings this healing and promise to you in particular. Look at how He has baptized you in particular. Look at how He has made you His own in those waters, promising that He has put His Name on you and joined Himself to you, and He cannot deny Himself. Look at how He has fed you with His body and blood, that you would taste and see for yourself that although doubt would lead you to question Him and His goodness, His love for the world is proven by His work, His life, His death, and most of all His resurrection. And as you look at those promises, look at how He is the God who fulfills His promises. He fulfilled the promise to send the One who would come and do all the things Isaiah spoke of. And so He will also fulfill the promise that all of the sorrow of this world is overcome and will be gone when He comes again.

As you wrestle with doubt, then, take comfort in John. Take comfort that he too doubted. He doubted understandably in the walls of a prison that didn't reflect the promises that the Messiah, the One coming would ultimately fulfill. But Jesus spoke the word of faith to Him. Hear that word of faith for yourself and know His promises that overcome all sorrows and doubt. And look for His coming at the end when all doubt and sorrow and grief will be overcome in His glorious Kingdom. Amen.