

St. Paul, MV, 12/14/2025

Advent 3A

Matthew 11: 2-11

This has been quite a week, huh? I mean, a week ago, we were aware that a couple of those atmospheric rivers were aimed at us, but, hey, we've been through that, and what Western Washingtonian is fearful of a little rain? And then, on Monday, it rained and rained and rained. Tuesday less so, and Wednesday it picked up again with a vengeance. Rivers swell in times like that, and our beautiful Skagit was no different. That rising water impacted individuals, families, crops, businesses, governments, and our general sense of ease during this time of quiet in Advent, this time of preparation of God *With Us*. But, in it all, we have learned more about what it means to be **WITH** another, especially during times of trial.

This is, as you know, is the Third Sunday in Advent. It is sometimes called *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* is a Latin word meaning 'rejoice,' often used in Christian liturgy to celebrate the approaching **joy of** Christmas amidst a season, marked by penitence and preparation, of quiet waiting. In some churches, the liturgies on this day are enhanced by the wearing of rose-colored vestments (several shades lighter than the often-used purple of Advent.) The word, *Gaudete* comes from the first words of the Mass's entrance antiphon from Philippians: "*Gaudete in Domino semper*" (rejoice in the Lord always) And so, we look ahead, we rejoice, we anticipate the joy that is to come, even in weeks like we have had this week. ***Anticipating what is to come was John's ministry.***

For two of the four Sundays in Advent, we hear this focus on John the Baptist – which, I believe, is appropriate. John was the announcer of Jesus and Jesus' Messiahship, but many took him (John) to be the Messiah. According to Luke and announced by the angel, Gabriel, John's birth was also a miraculous one. John was descended from priests on both his maternal and paternal sides, so with those role models, he didn't do any time wasting. As a woodworking apprentice. John got right to work as an evangelist.

John and Jesus, though they were both willing to risk speaking truth to power, were pretty different in how they did it. Jesus rubbed shoulders in town with most all sorts of people, but especially those on the margins of society. He interacted with folks, especially those in any need. John, on the other hand, lived in the wilderness, in austerity; he ate when he found food, and didn't when he didn't. John had a group of followers, just as Jesus did. Everything about John set him apart as a holy man – his way of life, his clothing, and above all, his message. The voices of the great prophets had died back a bit when John came on the scene, and then, there he and his loud (perhaps obnoxious?) proclamations were. He was more interested in talking about sin than in making a profit, about repentance than in compromise. John was tough. He was not so much interested in helping folks be productive members of society as he was in helping them prepare for the Kingdom of God and its justice. He faithfully condemned all who stood in the way of his work – like Herod, whom he blasted for being an all-around evil man; or the Pharisees and Sadducees for teaching religiousness instead of righteousness. John told everyone that God was coming with a sharpened ax and a flaming torch, and that the dead wood would soon be cleaned up. People liked his message, and they followed him, but they wondered, ***“Is he the one we have been waiting for?”***

John was already busy saying “Look over there, he’s the one we’ve been waiting for!” John’s expectation, like many others, was for a strong, bold Messiah, and one who would bring about justice and the kingdom right now. OR, at least that’s what he hoped for. Then Herod’s soldiers arrived with a warrant for his arrest (which often happens to prophets who speak truth to power) and John, who had become accustomed to living away from civilized society, began living in Herod’s prison. I imagine he fretted a good deal about what was happening with Jesus and whether he was being heard, and we know that he somehow received reports about that – even in his prison cell. Things were looking good. Jesus was healing folks, doing exorcisms, and performing signs and wonders. And John, in his prison cell, probably felt good about that – things were moving along. Jesus would soon be declared the Messiah, and that would give him authority to do more of what he really needed to do. But, that announcement never came, because Jesus only worked with very marginal people – lepers, demoniacs, hemorrhaging women – even a Roman soldier’s slave – nothing that would necessarily be known about outside one or two individuals. John may have thought, “what sort of witness is this to God’s glory and power? *How was helping the least going to help anyone know right from wrong?*”

So, John sent Jesus a message. “Are you he who is to come...or shall we look for another?” (Was I wrong about you Jesus? If I was wrong about you, just say so, and we’ll keep searching for the one who is to come.) But, Jesus would not answer John’s followers who brought the message. Instead, he turned them around to see the group of folks who were followers. (Like us..) a group of individuals who’d suffered a fair bit before meeting Jesus. Now they were stronger, and they were following him. And they were the lucky ones. There were still many blind, deaf, and dead still out there....many flood victims too. So, Jesus

said to John's men, "Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news brought to them, (and many of those living along the banks of rivers are found and helped). Notice Jesus did not directly answer John with a "Yes, I am he...." Instead, he replied, **Look and listen to what is happening**.

It was the prophecy of Isaiah – which we heard read this morning – about the lame leaping, the blind with sight and the speechless singing for joy, and NOT about the part John had focused on, about God coming with vengeance, with terrible recompense, but instead *God WITH us, healing and WITH grace, God WITH us. Emmanuel*. John, like so many others, had wanted a hugely powerful Messiah, one who would come and undeniably witness to the omnipotent righteousness of God, and set things straight finally. Instead what he got was, as Barbara Brown Taylor described it, a steady drip of God's mercy from a man who knew what it was to be the true Messiah.

I wonder what it is that you and I would expect if we'd been waiting then with them. Power, fame, and lots of influence? What is it that we would expect in a Messiah? John, looking for power and authority, had doubts – do we? Do we want a superhero God? Let's be honest, sometimes, that's what we do want. God with the raw power of a tidal wave who would sweep away our fears and doubts with one go? But that's not what we get. God, in Jesus, is the one who revealed his true nature by serving and by ***practicing the true nature of God, which is love***. And it suggests a steady drip, drip, drip of God's grace. Each word, each action, each WITH filling the dryness and the void in the world. We hear about

these sorts of things all over the place. People doing good things, words, actions, drip, drip, drip.

This week has been full of examples all around if we, following Jesus' advice, just look and listen. Neighbors helping neighbors. Often unsolicited. People doing the deep work of helping in times of crisis, people dropping off food for those in safe shelters when their homes are under water – or in danger of being so, people giving aid, talking, listening and being WITH another. First responders arriving in boats across the flood waters and aiding the elderly left sitting on their porch steps. Sheriff's deputies being careful not to drop the precious toy held by frightened children who know nothing about rising waters. Examples are endless...and many of you have been there. Look around, says Jesus, what do you see and what do you hear?

A dear friend of mine has a tree farm. Until this last week, happy groups of families and individuals found this year's Christmas tree on her farm. I was there last weekend with another friend who didn't need a tree, but went there to walk around in the peace of God's creation here in the Skagit Valley. That friend found a good deal of peace there, looking up east to the mountains of our Valley, and commented on it, what a place to be. And then the waters rose.

Today, the Christmas tree farm is closed and will not reopen this season because it is mostly under water. There will be much to clean up, much to rebuild, and even the loss of some trees, and certainly income for my friend. But she seems more aware of the steady drip, drip, drip of God's goodness, even in and in spite of her own losses – of the goodness of so many people looking in on her, of the Sedro Woolley Police coming to her home to

check on my friend and her husband, and then volunteers from the Sheriff's office showing up, unsolicited, to sandbag the daylight basement of their home. "I didn't ask for this..." she told me. "I had several tins of cookies ready for other purposes, but I took them out where these young volunteers were working tirelessly to be sure our home was semi-protected, and gave them those cookies. One of them shouted "Hey, we get cookies!!" A simple gift of cookies on a dark, wet, cold night with waters rising just beneath the level of where one is standing. Look around, said Jesus. What do you see and hear?

Many other stories that we could and may well share. Our faith is seen and heard in our actions. St. Francis once said, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words." That sets my direction. Pray, preach, pray some more, but DO. Our faith, our beliefs are seen in our actions "Look around you," invites Jesus, "what do you see, what do you hear?"

John, in preparing for the Advent of the Kingdom of God, asks, "Are you the one?" Jesus says, "What do you see?" The lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them, those trapped in floods are rescued and cared for . . . and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." This one to come is the revelation of God in the world, by the relentless, persistent, and yes, slow dripping of God's grace. Words, actions, God WITH us, who invites us into the world to do the same where there is much need. May we prepare the same way for the Advent of the Kingdom of God, sharing our lives and gifts with those in need, and may we find deep joy in that preparation.

12/14/25

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