

3 Advent Matthew 11:2-11
Christ and Grace December 15, 2019
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“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

This voice is the one we heard last week. The voice of John the Baptist, a wild man in the desert who was getting things done for God. Full of energy and purpose, he was a rough and ready prophet not at all afraid to speak truth to power. He let the Pharisees and Sadducees and all the people of Judea know that every single one of them was in need of repentance. John wasn't afraid to confront the hypocrisy and the assumptions of those who believed their ancestry guaranteed their salvation. John made sure they knew that one was coming who was more powerful than any earthly authority.

This week, John the Baptist is in a new place. He's gone from the vast wilderness to the captivity of a jail cell; from freedom to a death sentence; from certain faith to wondering if he had the truth after all. This week the voice cries out, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

A change of place can cause a change of perspective. No longer in the wilderness, no longer baptizing in the Jordan River, no longer having people come to him, John is now in a different desert, no longer prophesying but questioning, with people likely positioning themselves as far away from him as possible. Some of us may be familiar with having our plans changed, our expectations unmet, or our hopes dashed. Life brings challenges and change to all of us, even when we think we are doing the right thing, and sometimes precisely because we are doing the right thing.

In all his speaking of truth to power, John had dared to tell King Herod that he was in need of repentance. Herod had divorced his own wife in order to marry his brother's wife for the sake of political power. John told Herod that this was unlawful, plain and simple. But John's truth telling hit too close to home for Herod – it was not what he wanted to hear, and it landed the prophet in prison.

When you are imprisoned, you have a different perspective, and your questions change. When you are captive, your expectations change. When your freedom has been taken away, you then have an altered sense of freedom. Then, perhaps, you have the freedom to ask questions you have not risked asking before, concerns you have not dared to voice, or you have been told you should not utter. Think of how many times you have heard, in your family or at work or at church – *we don't talk about that*. And so you drop the question, until you find yourself in prison with nothing to lose.

Lest we think one place of perspective is better than the other, we need to notice the way Jesus answered John's question. There is no condemnation in his reply but rather, Jesus acknowledges John's inquiry not as one of doubt but of faith -- “Go and tell him,” says Jesus. “Go and tell John to believe in who I know him to be – a messenger who has prepared the way for the Messiah. Go

and tell John he did what he was called to be.” And in responding to John, Jesus is also telling us that it’s okay to be like John, it’s okay to ask John’s question, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” As Jesus sends words of reassurance to John he also expands John’s perspective on the Messiah beyond judgment and repentance to healing, new life, and good news.

Our tendency is to impose our perspectives about all things on others; to share our viewpoints from our place of privilege, as if they are better than those who don’t share our advantage. To tell others what to think because they could not possibly see and know what we are able to see and know. And oh my goodness, if you want a clear example of that, just listen to the arguing going on in the impeachment hearings. Too often these days, everyone is all too self certain and pride takes the place of humility and empathy. Certainty takes the place of questioning and openness. We pronounce judgment after judgment instead of embodying compassion and offering listening hearts.

John’s question is not one of doubt, but a question of trust. It’s his trust in God that makes it possible for him even to ask his question. And what we think John is asking all depends on how we hear the tone of his question.

Does the question come from a place of speculation or a place of introspection? Does it come from a place of controlling authority or from a place of true searching? Does it come from a place of disappointment that God has not met our expectations or from a place of newly discovered determination that perhaps God might be about to surprise us with healing and new life?

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" is the question at the heart of Advent. It gives voice to our wondering even as we await the coming of Christ. It allows us to express uncertainty even though we are people of faith. It provides us with the words to express what our hearts and souls actually feel when our mind tries us to convince us to stay quiet.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" is the question we ask from our own prisons. Whether our prisons are our limited imagination about God, our fear of those who are not like us, or our grief due to loss of loved ones or the perfect plans we had made. It is the question we ask from our penitentiaries when we can’t see past the concrete walls of divide and difference. It’s the question we ask from our personal jail cells that justifies our certainty that we know what’s best, even at the expense of the needs of others.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” is the question of longing -- longing for promises to come true even when all seems hopeless. Longing for what once was, but at the same time looking forward to what could be. It’s a question that comes from a place of trust in God. Trusting that God will answer our questions, not according to our selfish desires, but with the truth that brings our greater healing and wholeness.

There is a time to be the voice crying in the wilderness, speaking truth to power, and there is a time to be silent and listen for God’s voice. A time to question what God’s plans might be for us.

Let John's question be your question, from the place where you find yourself this week, this Advent, this season in your life. Ask the question not to answer it, not to solve it, not to tie it all up in a Christmas bow, but to lean in to the waiting, the wanting, and the wonder so as to hear God's voice, God's answer.¹

¹ Acknowledgment for much of this sermon to Karoline Lewis
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4767>