

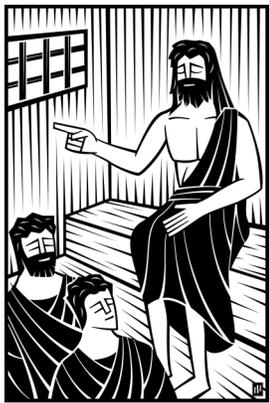
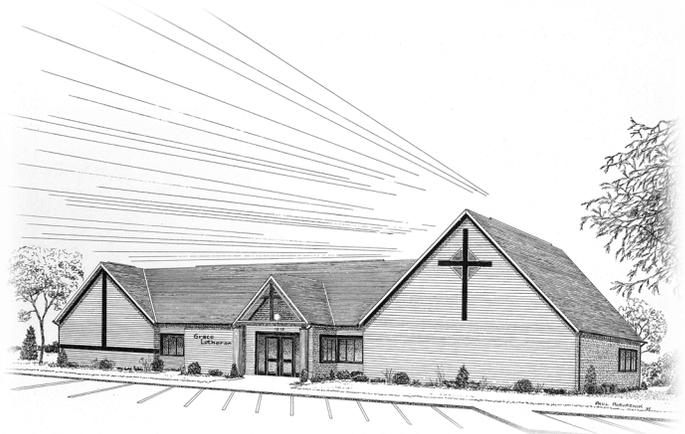
The Third Sunday in Advent

December 13, 2020

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Matthew 11:2-11

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?



What are you preparing for this Christmas? What are you hoping to see? Are your expectations for presents and gifts that might give you fleeting happiness? Or is there more to it that perhaps it will more clearly relate your affections towards someone else, and validate their feelings towards you?

Or are you hoping to see family at Christmas? Are you expecting some semblance of normalcy at the end of a year that has been anything but normal? Are you just hoping for a good time on a special day? What are you hoping to see at Christmas?

Are you hoping to see something special—*truly* special?! Are you hoping to see a Savior this Christmas? Yes, I tell you, and more than a Savior. You will see this Christmas the very Son of God made flesh for us. But do we look for him in all the wrong places? **What Are You Looking For?**

This was the question that Jesus asked the crowd repeatedly in our text for today. And it was essentially the question that John the Baptist was asking his disciples to wrestle with when he sent them to Jesus as well. And it's a good question for us to wrestle with too. **What Are You Looking For?** And sometimes not only do we struggle to know what we're looking for, but we also often have no idea where to find it. But today as we study Matthew 11 in our Christmas preparation, let's be thrilled that we will find far more than we could ever hope to imagine. We will find Christ, the perfect Savior we all need.

John the Baptist, whom Jesus calls "*The greatest*

born of women" (11a), was in prison. He was in a pretty wretched state. John the Baptist, a famous preacher and prophet of his day, captured the ear of Herod Antipas, who, even though he liked to listen to John preach, he threw John in prison because he exposed that Herod was sleeping with his brother's wife. John couldn't let such a sin slide, so he preached against it. That landed John in prison. Now, in our text as John sat in prison, we are presented with a very interesting question. John sends disciples to Jesus to ask him this puzzling question: "*Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else?*" (3) Did John really not know that Jesus was the Christ, the One Who Is Coming? Or does he send the disciples to ask that question of Jesus for the *disciples'* sake? I'll be honest that I have flipped back and forth on that question many times as I've studied this text over the years. I'd like to think that I can see it both ways. We don't want to ascribe some super-human ability to never waver in his faith as though he didn't have a sinful nature and never had any doubts in his faith. That's not the point of the text. And it's not out of a reason to defend John's reputation that I settle on the answer that John doesn't doubt here. He may very well have doubted. If he doesn't doubt here, he certainly doubted about other things throughout his life. We know that because he was a man born and bred in sin, who needed to follow his very own message of repentance and who needed to hear forgiveness, like everyone else.

But here's what we know from Scripture that might lead me in a different direction than that John doubts here. As we'll hear next week, John very clearly knew that Jesus of Nazareth was the Savior of the world. This is the one whom John himself

baptized and saw a witness from the Father and the Holy Spirit that Jesus was the Son of God at his baptism. In fact, John pointed to Jesus and directed people to him as the Christ, the Savior of the world when he said, *“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* (Jn 1:29). No, I don’t think John had any doubt on that particular point simply because he was in prison. And, look at this very text itself. What does Jesus go on to ask the crowd about? *“As these two were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the crowds about John. ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?’”* (7). Jesus assumes the answer to his question is, “No.” He assumes that people didn’t go out into the wilderness to hear John waver and falter in his convictions about the Messiah. They went out to hear a man with conviction. So, Jesus doesn’t chastise John to the crowd for doubting. Quite the opposite, he seems to indicate by that question that John *didn’t* waver in his conviction about the Messiah. John’s message was true! It was consistent! And it all hinged on him pointing people to Christ! If John wasn’t certain that Jesus really was the Christ, wouldn’t that invalidate his entire ministry?

So, why did John send the disciples to ask Jesus this question? Because even in John’s last days while in prison, he sought to do for his followers what he had always done for people throughout his entire ministry: point them to Christ. It’s as though John was asking his disciples the same question that Jesus asked the crowd. **What Are You Looking For?** His disciples might have said they were looking for the Christ, and that’s why they followed John the Baptist. More than once, John had to refute the idea that he himself was the Christ. And with all of John’s ministry, he directed people to the Savior—he directed them to Jesus of Nazareth! On top of all of that, John gives this beautiful confession before he is sent to prison in John 3:30, *“He [i.e. Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease.”* John always knew

that it was not about him. It was about Jesus. And he was more than happy to direct people to Jesus all throughout his ministry, just like (I might suggest here) he is happy to send them back to Jesus even from prison.

And isn’t that the very same piercing question that Jesus asked the crowd as well? He again and again bids the crowd, and us for that matter, to consider, *“What did you go out to see?”* (7, 8, 9). You see, much like John’s disciples, and much like the crowd around Jesus, we often miss the obvious, don’t we? We look for the wrong things and in all the wrong places. What are you hoping to see this Christmas? If we are hoping to find some satisfaction in our outward Christmas celebrations, we will be disappointed, and even if we are not disappointed in the moment, the momentary happiness will pass. If we are hoping to see some



validation of another person’s love toward us in gifts, that expectation can be disappointing if the right gift isn’t given or if it isn’t given by the right person. Or, even if it is validated, that love and affection may change over time or may be taken away if

we must be separated from that person. If our hope for this Christmas is to visit family and enjoy fellowship, perhaps more than any other Christmas, we may be in for a grave disappointment yet again. But where does that leave us? What are we really looking for? Happiness and satisfaction in a Savior? Yes, we certainly hope so. But that happiness and satisfaction doesn’t come in some fleeting hope that just maybe Jesus *might* be the one who is coming, whom we are waiting for, or whom we expect to change the world and make a difference in *this* life. And it isn’t just centered on our worship experience or expectations for a nice and pleasant church service. There is much more to it than all of that.

No, what did you go out to see? A Savior? Yes, I tell you and more than a Savior. Listen to Jesus’ answer to John’s disciples. Listen to him as he uses his ministry itself as proof and validation that he is

the Messiah who was to come: *“Go, report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor. Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me”* (4-6). Tell John what you see and hear. Tell him about the prophecies which he knows and has preached to others, about the miracles that Jesus had already done, which Isaiah long ago said would take place. Go and tell John that these Messianic signs are true in every part, that they are the validation that he and every sinner is looking for. This Jesus opens eyes and remobilizes dead limbs. This Jesus cleanses sick lepers and unstops ears to hear. This Jesus even raises the dead, and more astoundingly still, he preaches the gospel to people who so desperately need to hear it, like John, like John’s disciples, like the crowds, like his own disciples, and like you and me. This Jesus brings blessing upon blessing to those who receive him by faith through that very same gospel which is proclaimed. What an astounding thing this Jesus does?! **What Did You Go Out to See?** A Savior, which you found in Jesus, which can only be found in Jesus, and which exceeds all our wildest expectations! That’s our Jesus!

And listen to Jesus’ next astonishing point. *“So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you! And he is much more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ Amen I tell you: Among those born of women there has not appeared anyone greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”* (9-11). Jesus points to John’s entire ministry as the forerunner of Christ and points out what a unique position that really was. John is the prophet who stands with one foot in the Old Testament before Christ comes, and one foot in the New Testament after Christ comes. No other prophet got to see the ultimate fulfillment of their prophecies the way that John the Baptist did. No other prophet could point with his physical

finger and direct people to the Messiah. But that’s exactly what John did, as we’ll see next week, and it’s what it seems John seeks to do here even while in prison. He always directs people to Christ, which is what a faithful prophet does. He points people to the place where their expectations can be met—in Jesus, in the fulfillment, in the Word! For that reason, John is the greatest born among women.

Yet, Jesus has to qualify that point with yet another astounding one. After reminding also us that we need to go back to Christ and back to his Word for validation in our faith and for its strengthening even in the time of doubting, Jesus then highlights both himself and our faith. *“Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”* (11b). Is Jesus talking about himself with that passage? Is he the one who is the least in the kingdom of heaven? Yes, and that’s what he showed us by going to cross to die for our sins and for our doubts. And that’s why Scripture says that God raised Jesus to the highest point and exalted him above all others, because of Jesus’ redeeming work of humiliation in his suffering and death. Yet isn’t Jesus also talking about us in that passage? The answer is yes! He is talking about us, who though we are the least in God’s kingdom, yet in simple faith as we receive Jesus with faith given to us by the Holy Spirit working through the very gospel which John, and also Jesus himself, preached, we have everything John had in his prophecy and its fulfillment. It’s a both/and! We are great, because in Jesus we find everything we need.

And those are the hopes and expectations we take with us into our Christmas celebration. We prepare to meet Christ, not just the tiny baby in a manger, but the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world—yes, my Savior and yours. As the famous Christmas hymn confesses, so it will once again prove true for us again this Christmas as we await the arrival of Christ, *“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight”* (CW 65:1). God bless us as we continue to wait patiently and hopefully for Christ. Amen.