

Sermon Transcript for December 12, 2021

Due to Pastor Poock being unexpectedly ill, Elder Roy Heflin led the service and preached this sermon based on a reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 11, verses 2-6.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ, on this third Sunday in Advent, the anticipation of Christmas continues to build, and now the great celebration is well in sight. The Advent wreath gives us candles lit on each day, reflecting a joy expressed in our first two readings. Many of you at Faith Lutheran have put up your Christmas trees, beautifully decorated to reflect this season time.

Regarding our trees' decorations here, I remind you that the ones we use have a particular name. They're called Chrismons. Chrismons are a rendering of many different names for Jesus. The word comes from joining together their abbreviation of two words, Chris for Christ and Mon, which is short for monograph, a monograph that is a stylistic rendering of someone's name. Chrismons are often abbreviations of Christ's name or title in the Greek language, or images reflecting names derived from references to Him in the Bible, such as the Son of Righteousness.

Chrismons are not ancient tradition. They've only been part of the church since the 1800s, but they are growing tradition and one that enables people to explore the many ways Jesus our Savior has been described and honored by the Church over the centuries.

Jesus Christ is certainly worthy of our honor. Yet sometimes people question this, even those who were at one time were thoroughly convinced. In our Gospel reading today, John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, the voice of one crying in the wilderness "Prepare the way of the Lord," that John now sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?"

Did you ever wonder how could John ask this? Didn't he just baptize Jesus perhaps a year or so earlier? At that time, didn't His spirit come down upon Jesus and a voice speak from heaven, proclaiming Him God's beloved Son? Didn't John honor Jesus with one of those great names by which we remember Him, calling Him the "Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sins of the World"?

How could John now question whether Jesus was indeed the one God had sent in fulfillment of His promise? Many readers of this text have long struggled with John's question. Some have suggested that John himself was not questioning Jesus, but that his disciples were. In this view, John sent His disciples so they could ask their question to Jesus directly. However, there is nothing in the text itself to indicate this. Instead, Jesus explicitly tells John's disciples to go tell him what they had seen and what they had heard. Jesus is clearly concerned here about John and John's disciples. To me, it seems very clear that this text records a wavering of John's faith, a time of doubt.

John may have been strong in faith at one point, but now he was wondering and questioning. On the other hand, this is troubling to us, for we would prefer those so close to Jesus to have a great and unwavering faith. On the other hand, knowing that someone so close to Jesus once struggled is also a powerful witness to us, showing that struggles can happen to anyone, and that includes us.

Struggles of faith, whether of John or others, are not hidden by the Biblical writers as if they were a great disgrace. Jesus reacts to these struggles with love and grace. He does not chastise John for doubting, and

when He calls out His disciples for doubting, saying things like "Oh you of little faith" and "Stop doubting and believe," He does so in ways that encouraged them, not to condemn them. Having said this, a strong faith is still better than a weak faith, for doubts can lead to trouble. To help us avoid the trouble, let's do some more thinking about John and try to understand what may have caused his doubts.

One of the things John preached was that after the Messiah appeared, John himself would need to diminish in importance. "He must increase, but I must decrease," he had once said. Messages like this are easier to say than to accept. No one likes to experience loss, even if they know it's supposed to happen. When John made his statement about decreasing, he added quite a bit more explanation on this, almost as if he needed to convince himself. We have the same kinds of feelings. We are happy when the next generation grows up and assumes responsibility for the things we once did, for we know that's the way it's supposed to happen. But we also feel sad when our turn is over, and this gets us thinking about why. Why must we diminish? Is this really plan of a loving God? Is this something I want to submit to? John may just have been looking for an extra bit of peace about how things were going. He may have just needed a little more assurance. Jesus was happy to provide it, at least to the extent He could. Ultimately, John would have to believe in faith. The same is also true for us.

Perhaps even more challenging to John was the fact that at the time of his doubting, John was locked up in prison. He was there, you may recall, because he had faithfully carried out his task as a prophet of God and condemned a very public sin of King Herod. Herod in turn responded by throwing the prophet into prison, playing out a scene which had happened frequently in Israel's past. John had the satisfaction of knowing he was in the right, but that didn't make the consequences of his action any easier to face. One can only sleep so well in prison. The isolation, the fear, the injustice, these all certainly wore on John, and they may have worn down his faith as well. That's often what happens to us. I've walked with many faithful people over the years who have experienced troubling doubts when physical or emotional pain occurs. In fact, I would just say that about every time pain occurs in life, that is also a time when people do some questioning.

And this is especially the case when a person hasn't experienced much pain in their life before. That same pain, however, can also cause people to lean even more heavily on the Lord and ultimately strengthen their faith. This takes time, for the change from doubt to faith is a process. But it can happen, and it often does.

As I stated before, God understands our times of questioning. In them, He encourages us, speaks to us, and lovingly endures our doubts, calmly answering us as Jesus did with John. He is patient with us and helps us through the process. Let's do some more thinking about the response of Jesus to John in a minute, but first there's one more possibility for John's doubt that we should consider.

John's message, you may recall, was primarily a message of preparation. As such, he ended up his preaching a lot of law. He told the people the right way to live, and he urged them to turn from their sins. "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance," he said, while also warning, "Even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees." With all of this emphasis on repentance and judgment, could it be that John was just a little too anxious for this repentance and judgment to happen? Could it be that he expected to see quicker results?

Perhaps John, as he sat there in prison, thought about his world and despaired that people were still so immoral and that their repentance seemed so insincere. Perhaps he was hoping that the one sent by God would do so quickly, swiftly, and thoroughly in his own day, and maybe even then John would be able to see the sinners of his day pay for their sins. We can't say for sure that John thought this way, but we know that we sometimes do. We get tired of godlessness around us. We get frustrated that sinners keep hurting us and

others with their sin, and then we wonder if God is really ever going to do something about it. We get impatient; we get angry. And sometimes we doubt. Maybe John's question was one of impatience or maybe it was the one of a misunderstanding the coming One's real task.

Everyone else in Jesus's circle had times of misunderstanding what Jesus was doing. Why not John? As Jesus did to His disciples many times so He also did to John, He answered him. He told John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you have seen and what you have heard." And what had they heard and seen? Jesus reminds them, "The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." As we examine this list of evidence that Jesus points out, we immediately note how much of it involves miracles of healing. The blind received their sight. The lame walk, et cetera. These things are happening quite literally everywhere Jesus went. The Scriptures record multiple examples for us. John would certainly have heard of these, but maybe he hadn't seen them.

You and I have seen miracles of healing. We've seen many, many examples of help and healing in our day, but maybe we've given all the credit to our doctors or to nature or just simple good fortune or luck instead of the power and will of our God. Ever thought of thanking Him, praising Him when you hear and see? Why do we doubt that God is behind all the healing? Maybe it is because there are times when God doesn't heal the way we want Him to, or maybe it is because we don't like His plans. Or maybe it's because our view of healing is too narrow. Maybe we only think about the body and don't appreciate the healing which comes to our souls. Maybe we overlook the small steps of healing, which come through things like kind words, messages of hope, and acts of forgiveness.

When John questioned Jesus, Jesus put forth the evidence of His healing as reason to believe in Him as God's Chosen One. That same evidence needs to be pointed out today. Where Christ Jesus is present, healing is taking place. Jesus' list of evidence to John included many kinds of healing. The last miracle listed stands out. When Jesus notes that the dead are raised, it may sound like one more thing or item on the list, but we know that's not the case. The raising of the dead is the ultimate miracle, one that cannot be explained by skilled doctors, natural causes, good fortune, or luck. The raising of the dead is the defeat of our greatest enemy, death. The raising of the dead is only given by God. Jesus raised the dead during His ministry, and then He raised himself from the dead to show that death is not the end of God's plan for His people. All people will be raised from the dead someday. Those who have been raised and acknowledge God's forgiveness of their sins through Jesus Christ will live forever in the new life to come. Those who do not receive God's forgiveness in Christ face God's judgment of sin on their own.

In the list of evidence He presents to John, Jesus mentions one more item, an item which doesn't seem to fit with the rest because we don't think of it as healing or as a miraculous event. But its inclusion here means that it's very important nonetheless. Jesus tells John that the poor have Good News preached to them. This preaching is listed at the end because it is the natural extension of Jesus' miraculous works and because it leads to the healings people need the most. True Christian preaching is Good News because it heals the poor in spirit, those who realize their need before God. It includes the law of God telling us how to live and reminding us how we come up short, but is dominated by the Gospel, the Good News that in Christ Jesus, we find the forgiveness of our sins, all of our sins.

In last Sunday's Gospel reading, we heard that John was preaching the Good News, evangelizing as it can also be called. Preaching the Good News is our task too. Will you share the Good News with someone else this Christmas season? Jesus concludes His message to John with these words, "Blessed is the one who is not

offended by me." Jesus here is calling John to believe, but His statement seems bigger than this too. Taken at face value, it suggests that God blesses any who merely refrain from the finding of offense with Jesus. We can't say for sure what these blessings might be, but perhaps this speaks to a door which remains open to them: our God's continued patience, our God's further invitations. Our God, of course, wishes His Son to be more than just inoffensive to people. But it is a start for those who have ears to hear. As Christmas approaches, many people will wrestle anew with the message of Jesus Christ. Through this holy time, they will see a little more clearly the blessing of lifting up voices of celebration and observe with a little more clarity how the message shines light in the darkness of the world, our world.

Many too will be moved by God coming to us in such a gentle and beautiful way through the birth of a child. Some of these will be moved to faith. Others, sadly, will find some kind of offense. People are easily offended in our day, as we all know. We who believe must be careful not to impose our celebration on anyone. At the same time, we can't help but give voice to our joy, and our joy in Jesus moves us to share its sources with others.

Let us therefore resolve to show our joy in gracious and loving ways, with an eye toward works of healing and appreciation of the miracle of God's work and His Word doing its work. We know the Good News. You know the Good News, and we all know that His Good News overcomes any darkness of doubt. May it be so in your life at Christmas and in the new year, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior. And all God's people said ...

Amen.