

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT – Gaudete

December 11, 2022

Readings: Isaiah 40: 1-11, 1 Corinthians 4: 1-5, Matthew 11: 2-11

John the Baptizer Prepares the Way for the Lord The voice of the Baptizer cried out in the wilderness: “*Prepare the way of the Lord . . .*” (Isa. 40:1). John called the people to be made ready for the Messiah’s coming through repentance, for “*all flesh is grass*” (Isa. 40:6). Now He asks from prison, “*Are you the one who is to come . . . ?*” (Matt. 11:2). Jesus’ works bear witness that He is. The sick are made well; the dead are raised, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. Their iniquity is pardoned; they have received from the Lord’s hand double forgiveness for all their sins. The “*stewards of the mysteries of God*” (1 Cor. 4:1) still deliver Christ’s overflowing forgiveness to the poor in spirit, comforting God’s people with the word of the Gospel which stands forever. This Gospel produces rejoicing among all those who believe.

Sermon Transcript:

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

So here in Isaiah we have a prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. And this sounds amazing and wonderful. It talks about Zion and Judah lifting up their voice. "The good news has come, your Savior is here. He comes with might and His arm to rule. And His reward is with Him. He will tend His flock. He will protect His flock." All of this sounds amazing. Power and might and majesty. He's coming victorious. And this is the image that John had when he was preaching. He was out in the wilderness and we know he was wearing camel's hair and a belt of a rope and he ate locust and honey and just a wild kind of looking man. But he was definitely called a prophet.

And we know he was a prophet when he proclaims the Word of God to the people. "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent because you want to be in His kingdom because He has the power and the might and the authority and the riches and the blessings and you want to be a part of that." And so he proclaims this message of repentance to the people. Now, John is not a lukewarm kind of guy. You know exactly where John stands. In fact, when the Pharisees and the Sadducees came out to see what was going on, John wasn't really kind to them necessarily. He looks at them and says, "You brood of vipers who warned you to flee the coming judgment." Not exactly a soft kind of cuddly kind of guy. He was very hard. He was very focused because God's Word, to be honest, is very hard and focused.

The law of God allows no wiggle room for us. He says, obey. And when we fail to obey, the judgment is death. That is the truth of the Word of God and the law of God. Anything less than perfection leads to death. And yet John doesn't just preach repentance and fear, but he preaches this so that we might recognize and look for the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, of the salvation that comes of His victory over sin, over death, over the devil. And in John's case, he thought, well, probably over the Romans too. And so John is preaching this message of repentance. He is the prophet of prophets. Jesus says that he is greater than all that have come before. He's more than a prophet. Think about this. God raises up prophets at the proper time in the Old Testament to tell the people that they are not worshiping God properly and they need to repent.

But John is a prophet that was prophesied about. Not only is he a prophet, but the other prophets prophesied that he would come, that he would be the forerunner, that he would be the one who would be blessed enough to see the culmination of all of the other prophets before him, Isaiah and Malachi and everybody else in between who had proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. John had the privilege of standing and seeing Him coming, recognizing Jesus when he comes to the Jordan. Behold the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sins of the world. John recognized Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit as the Savior, and he proclaims it boldly. But now he's in prison.

He's John the Baptist who is proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. The kingdom of God is at hand. And what happens? What is his reward? He gets sent to prison and eventually beheaded. And John rightfully had a few questions. Look, I proclaimed the victory of Christ. I proclaimed your coming and I thought we would just succeed and be successful and take over. And I'm languishing in prison. What's going on? I don't understand this. I thought I had it right. I was pretty sure I was listening to the Word of God, but this is not working out the way I thought it should. So he does have questions of Jesus. Now that should give us a bit of hope. If John the Baptist, who is prophesied by the Old Testament prophets to come, if he was the cousin of Jesus, if he was the one who was there at Jesus's baptism, who witnessed the dove descending upon Jesus and the voice from heaven saying, "This is My beloved Son with whom I'm well pleased." If that man has doubts, there's hope for you and me. It's okay. It's normal and common for us to doubt, especially when our life doesn't quite go the way we thought it should.

Especially when it doesn't seem like we're living the victorious life. When we believe in God and we trust in God and life still throws us curve balls left, right and center. When we believe in God and we serve Him and we still don't have a clue where we're headed or what we're doing. When we serve God and it seems like we're still getting nowhere and we have enemies attacking us on all sides. Interestingly enough, I was just talking to someone and they were talking about how when you're against God, when you are not a Christian, you only have one enemy, God the Father, and He's a loving enemy who wants you to become part of His kingdom. When you become a Christian, you get a whole slew of extra enemies who really don't like you and want you to fail. The devil, the world, our own sinful nature and everybody else. So you gain a whole bunch more enemies when you become a Christian. But the one enemy that is now your friend and your Father and your Shepherd is more powerful than all those enemies combined. And He promises that He will be with you, that He will guard you and keep you. But in the meantime, we are called to look to the Word of God for our comfort and hope just as He gave to John.

John is in prison. He's questioning his faith, concerned that maybe he misunderstood what was going on. And Jesus reassures him. Look at what I am doing: the blind received their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, even the dead are raised up to new life. But again, that is nothing compared to the last phrase. And the poor have Good News preached to them. All of the healing, all of the miracles, everything that Jesus did to heal those who were sick and injured and dead sometimes, all of that was to help us to see and to know that He has authority over life and death. And so therefore we can trust His Word for us. That He does come as victor, but not to establish an earthly kingdom because all kingdoms will pass away. But to establish an eternal kingdom that will last for all eternity. And He does have power and might. And we are freed from the cares of this world, from the judgment of sin.

We are part of God's kingdom right now. We have the power and majesty of God with us. It's not something we're going to wait for and hope that we get when we die or when Christ comes again. It is something that is

ours today. By His Word, He has adopted us into the family. He has made us His children. Now we may feel like we're in prison right now. Some of us, our bodies don't quite work the way they used to and should. And it feels like sometimes we're imprisoned in the frailty of our own bodies. Sometimes it feels like we're imprisoned in the frailty of our society. Everything that should go right doesn't. The laws that we should make aren't being made and things don't work the way we thought they should. Sometimes we feel imprisoned by the choices that we've made in the past and we're still living with some of the consequences today. And we struggle with that.

And we feel weighed down by the cares of this world. We feel weighed down by our own personal struggles of our own life, yet alone the life of the world around us. And so maybe sometimes we do have doubts about whether... is God really with us? Am I really understanding this correctly? And that's where we get into understanding what Paul was saying to the Corinthians, we are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries. It is a mystery that God came in weakness. He did not come mighty with a strong arm that we see, not literally with a sword in hand and wiping out the Romans and creating an earthly kingdom. But He came with might nonetheless. The power to conquer our ultimate enemy: sin and death. He has conquered sin and we are free from the guilt of that sin because He did it for us. He died in our place. We don't even need to be afraid of death because we have already faced death. Scripture says that in our baptisms, we were buried with Christ on the cross and we were brought to new life in His resurrection. So we've been buried with Christ. We've already faced death.

And it holds no fear for those who know Christ. So we can understand John's doubts because we've had them ourselves. But we also need to hear that Jesus Christ tends His flock like a shepherd, and He will gather the lambs into His arms and He will carry them in His bosom and gently lead those that are with young. In other words, He will protect us and guard us and keep us in His loving care. And we do not need to be afraid. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Nothing can snatch us from His hand. He does have power.

It's just not power that the world sees or recognizes. It is a power over death, power over sin, a power over heartache and sorrow, power over all things. And we are the beneficiaries of that. Take a look at what God has done and what He says. He has taken care of our illnesses and sicknesses. We may still feel them in this world today, but I guarantee you, when we fall asleep in Christ and we rise to new life, all of that's going to be gone. Every single one of us is going to be in perfect health. Every single one of us, all the aches and the pains and the injuries that you have - gone. All the sorrows that you experience in this world wiped away. We will be healed and we will be restored in Christ. What a glorious day that will be and something to look forward to. In the meantime, keep your eyes upon Christ. Do not look at the prison walls around you. Look at the Christ who is above you, who is with you, and will never leave you nor forsake you.

May His grace and His mercy and His peace be and abide with you always, now and forevermore, unto life everlasting. Amen.