

Third Sunday in Advent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
11 December 2022

Matthew 11:2-12

The Baptist preacher William Miller studied the prophecies of the prophet Daniel from 1831 to 1843. He came to believe that the second coming of Jesus would take place on October 22, 1844. His teachings became very popular because many parts of the country were burning with Evangelical zeal after the Second Great Awakening (1800-1840.) Many expected Jesus to return very soon, including many of Miller's disciples. They sold or gave away all they had, made their peace with others, and said their goodbyes in preparation for October 22. The day came and went, however, in a rather uneventful way. Thousands were greatly disappointed, many abandoned the group and went back to their former denominations, and some left Christianity all together in what became known in the Country as "The Great Disappointment." The disciples left later formed the Seventh Day Adventists.

There is a second brief story by Dr. J. Wallace Hamilton. He tells about one of the weirdest auction sales in history which took place in 1926. Approximately 1500 patented models of old inventions that never succeeded were put on Public auction. The items for sale included a bed-bug repellent; a cure for snoring that consisted of a horn that went from the person's mouth to his ear, causing him to wake-up every time he snored; and a pulpit like this one that adjusted to the height of the preacher. Needless to say, many of these items caused more laughter than interest and were sold for miniscule amounts, as most were there just for the fun the ridiculous inventions provided. The unspoken story is that every item coming to the auction block represented someone's failed dreams and expectations.

Today, we also have a story of disappointment and unrealized expectations. Last time we saw John the Baptist he was out in the Wilderness of Judea. We spoke last week about John's successful wilderness ministry. How he called the nation to repentance and good fruits in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of God, and how he was not afraid to proclaim his message even to the powerful and the political powers of the day. But a lot has changed since those early days of his ministry. The Baptist is now in prison, arrested for preaching against Herod's orchestrated assassination of his brother and marriage to his brother's wife. As he looks at the confining walls of his prison cell, the words of Isaiah burn in his mind and in his heart, like a flame that refuses to be extinguished, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." (Isaiah 35:4). Surely, Jesus was this Messiah who was to fulfill Isaiah 35, as well as Isaiah 61:1-2, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners..." Certainly, Jesus would come to save him!

But, As John lingers in prison and as he realizes that his ministry is most likely over, he longs for a conclusive sign that Jesus is truly the Messiah. He sends his disciples to inquire, “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” Now, you may be wondering, “Is this the same John the Baptist who first proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah?” He spoke with such convincing words, pointing to him as the one who was to come, boldly stating, “I am not worthy of carrying his sandals!” What happened to John?

He hears that the Messiah is going about fulfilling parts of Isaiah 35 and 61 by healing the blind, the mute, and the deaf; by raising some from the dead; and by preaching Good News to the poor. But as the days go by, and as one long painful day follows the next, John grows weary that Isaiah 35:4 and 61:8 will not be fulfilled within his lifetime. These verses speak of the “terrible recompense” for those who oppress the nation and the “blessed recompense” for Israel. He wants proof beyond a reasonable doubt that Jesus intends to fulfill these parts of the prophecies within John’s time. He wants to know when Jesus will start raising up an army to fight against those who oppress Israel. To give the wicked what’s coming to them and to judge them finally and decisively with the terrible recompense. John is losing patience and is becoming desperate!

Least we become judgmental of John, let us for a second consider what’s at stake for him here. He has given up all that he has for this cause. He has given up the possibility of living in the city of Jerusalem, choosing the wilderness in fulfillment of the prophecies. He has given up on the idea of having a family, a stable trade, perhaps even a priestly career like his father’s. In a short while he will even pay with his life for his commitments to Jesus as the Messiah. He wants to know that all was not in vain. He wants to know with certainty that his life wasn’t like one of those inventions in our story. Inventions that started with great hope and deeply held beliefs and dreams, but ended up being cause for ridicule and laughter. He wants to know if his sacrifices made a difference in God’s plan of salvation.

Jesus’ answer to John’s disciples, ironically, does not offer John the comfort he seeks. In fact, Jesus quotes back Isaiah 35. “Go tell John what you see and what you hear, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” Absent from here is any mention to any political release of captives, of any armed “day of recompense”, and of any taking the kingdom by force. Jesus’ mission is a different kind of release, not the release that John expects, and Jesus asks his cousin to have faith, “blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

My friends we are all like John. We all have questions and doubts in our hearts. We all have expectations of God and people that are sometimes not realized in the way we want them to be. Perhaps this is a normal part of our journey of faith. Perhaps we should not be discouraged by the “Great Disappointments” we experience in our journey of faith. We too like John have different expectations of what our Messiah should do,

when he should return, and how he should respond to our prayers and petitions in the meantime. But we don't know the mind of Christ. We cannot see the big picture.

Like John we too look for signs that God is active in our life, but sometimes we look for the wrong signs. Some of us believe God is active in our lives because we are wealthy, in good health, have good children, or are happily married. But perhaps these are the wrong signs. Perhaps it is at times of darkness, loneliness and doubt that God is the most present in our lives. Perhaps John too was looking for all the wrong signs. Lastly, my friends, we like John want what we want, when we want it, and how we want it. We want God's plans for us and for humanity to unfold in our time, not in God's time. Actually, we want God's time to coincide with our time. Better yet, we want God to remain in constant communication with us, informing us of his upcoming decisions and consulting with us along the way. We too like John need to give God time to bring into fulfillment his plans for our lives, trusting that he will give us far more than what we deserve or can ask for. To have faith is to abandon ourselves into his hands, even in the absence of certainty, and even when we don't know what the outcome will be.

Our Messiah has come to bring release to the captives, I pray that we may be given faith in his promises and strength to remain committed to his Gospel. Amen!