

Today is Gaudete Sunday, when we celebrate Mary as mother of our Lord and Savior. It is the Sunday where we take a breath from our fasting and self reflection to be a bit kinder to ourselves. So then, it makes perfect sense that we should begin by talking about John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. You see, John the Baptist was experiencing a common feeling - we have all likely felt it before - the feeling of doubt. This is common among parents, Mary and Joseph probably had some questions.

The last time we heard from John, he was completely on board with the idea that Jesus was the Messiah. In fact, John told us earlier that he was not worthy to tie Jesus' sandals. Now, the two of them stand apart - John is in prison because of his passionate reprimand of Herod marrying his brother's wife. Meanwhile, Jesus had called the disciples into action.

It seems obvious: one of these men's ministries is going well and the other one has hit a cell wall. It is not surprising then, that John has some second thoughts about the ministry of Jesus. John may have thought Jesus would be the type of Messiah to come into the world and begin fighting. Instead, Jesus gathers, teaches, heals, and preaches.

The accounts that reach John may feel off balance or they may create a certain hope that could give way to joy.¹ Our prophet, John is not a stupid man: what comes next in our story of John's life is his beheading. It is possible John recognized that Herod, or someone in his midst, might have had his earthly ending near. As such, it is likely that John would desire more certainty around Jesus' identity.

John had an interesting journey: he was an outcast, a challenger, imprisoned, and ultimately a martyr. It would be easy in this middle section of his life to challenge or question his dedication to Jesus. We hear our Savior's first half of his reply to John through the messengers, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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."² These words wonderfully illustrate the actions of Jesus. They are a sign of hope to carry to John that will hopefully lift his spirits, calm his fears, and quiet his doubts.

Jesus goes from answering a question from John to turning the mirror on our own actions and maybe our own doubts. Jesus invites an honest assessment of our belief in his ministry, too.

Of course, this is not the natural progression. Often when doubts arise, we want to push them away or bury them underground., John did a hard thing. He lovingly confronted Jesus and sought a response. This is a constant theme throughout Matthew's Gospel.³

I believe we need this season of penitence to examine our thoughts and actions. Advent in some ways is a mini-Lent, where we reach within ourselves and examine our lives.

The early church saw the color of "violet"⁴ used both for Advent and Lent. It was a time of encouraging us to sit with discomfort and doubt.

Simultaneously, sometimes we need a break from long periods of discomfort. This is why we have Gaudete Sunday, where we hear the words of Mary,

"He has mercy on those who fear him *

in every generation.

¹ Saunders, C. (2022).

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-matthew-112-11-6>

² Matthew 11:5

³ Hendriksen, W. (1973). *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. pp.1026-1033

⁴ "Violet" meant different colors at different places based on the colors available from dye derived from berries. In England where it was cold, the colors were closer to blue.

He has shown the strength of his arm, *
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.”⁵

We are the lowly, the broken, and sometimes like John, we are the doubtful.
There is little in our life that feels certain and we need this Sunday to lift ourselves up.

There are many people who have been in a parenting role to children. On this Gaudete Sunday, we remember the feelings of being a parent. It is a time of magnificent joy and sometimes, it is a time of doubt and fear. This Advent, as the Pediatric Intensive Care Units fill up, I remember the uncertainty that David and I felt on a winter week almost five years ago.

I felt a bit nervous as we went to the doctor’s office, but nothing compared to the way my heart stopped when this pediatrician that I had known for years calmly left the room returning with an oxygen monitor.

She asked if I would like to go in an ambulance or by car to The Hospital with this child. David drove quickly and efficiently to The Woodlands (The beds at the main hospital were full) where we were ushered into the room and immediately brought to the ICU. Horrified, I watched as this child that I prayed for for years, that her sister had prayed and wished for was hooked up to a breathing machine. Her lethargic body lay on the cot.

She had RSV, but the cough that her sister had at this age years ago was not the same for her. We did not know what to do as we watched the machines help her breath. I remember looking at Faith and wondering if she would breathe again without the assistance of a machine or if she would wake up to smile.

When she opened her eyes, she only wanted to be held, so that is what I did amidst the tubes and machines. A couple of days after she refused to eat and had lost some weight the resident and attending became concerned, I filled a bottle and Faith firmly closed her mouth, stubbornly refusing. This is when my fear turned to horror. I did the only thing that I could: I asked for prayers from our churches. I could not find the words to talk to God about my anger and confusion.

The Daughters of the King began to pray. David held my hand. Still, my doubt was palpable. I felt trapped in a jail with fear as the walls. I doubted my ability as a mother and began to doubt God’s plans. I doubted that I would bring this child back to our house.

I named her Faith because she was evidence of God’s goodness even though we cannot always see it. And here I was, just weeks after her birth in a hospital room doubting that same mercy. Eventually, I knew I needed to pray, and so I began with the Daily Office, I may not have had the words, but my Prayer Book did.

The attending at the hospital had more ideas, the nurses began “guiding” the resident, eventually feisty Faith took some milk and began breathing on her own. There were some relapses, however, God gifted me with my memories of times when I was a chaplain and visited similar patients in the hospital.

To our great relief Faith bounced back, and continues to be a bouncy and healthy child today. When we were going through this scary event, kind words and reminders of God’s love is about all we have to cling to. Like Mary, I felt like the lowly lifted up in a time of doubt. My soul still magnifies God for this blessing. I know most of you have moments like this where all we have is faith and doubt, we must wrestle with both experiences, and turn our hearts to God.

⁵ Book of Common Prayer (1979). “Morning Prayer Rite II.” pp.91-92

When we are in doubt, feeling as if we are in a prison without hope of release, we have to bring our doubts directly to God. If words escape us, we can sit in silence or use a prayer from the Book of Common Prayers. Christ wishes to carry our burdens for us. Let us give God that opportunity by remembering that God is our center.

What I love about the Episcopal Church is that we are able to feel certainty for each other in times of doubt. Our faith is a communal one: when I am questioning the nature of Christ then others pray for me. The same is true if you have questions or doubts. Together, we can lift each other up.

Matthew's gospel does not record Mary's use of the Magnificat, however, it is weaved into the essence of the Gospel Writer's message. Matthew's Gospel focuses on overcoming challenges as a community. In the reading for today, we see Matthew focus on John feeling excluded from the community. He is in jail, away from Jesus and needs reminding of his light. It is an apt example of how to encourage each other and help us find certainty in Christ even in our times of doubt. My prayer for you today is that you find joy through the certainty God's bountiful mercy. Amen.