

Homily, St. Andrew's - 8:00am  
Advent 3 (BCP), Sunday, December 14, 2014  
Matthew 11:2-10

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

We continue our Advent journey today with another moment in the story of John the Baptist. Last week we considered the entry of John into the long line of Hebrew prophets, as told at the very beginning of Mark's story of Jesus. Today we hear a second phase of John's story in relationship to Jesus, as told in Matthew's account, as we continue in our preparations to receive God into our lives and our world once more.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, John the Baptist entered the story in chapter 3 with a message of repentance from the wilderness of Judea: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," John called. (3:2) John goes on to baptize those who go out to him and along the way, he had harsh words for the Pharisees and Sadducees who find themselves among those coming for baptism. His words to them are a warning not to take for granted their status as children of Abraham and then he concludes by pointing to another, more powerful one, who is yet coming: "I baptize you with water for repentance," John said, "but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." John paints a dramatic eschatological picture of fire and judgement! It is a vision of powerful end-of-time saviour who will come in rather spectacular fashion.

When Jesus then comes to John for baptism, John seems to recognize him as the messianic saviour for whom he and his community have been waiting. John questions Jesus: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But once Jesus responds, the baptism continues on and after he hears John had been arrested, Jesus takes up his ministry, first preaching John's message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," and then going on to speak and perform many deeds of compassion and healing.

Today we hear the next chapter in John's story. News of Jesus has reached John in prison. In the telling, Jesus is referred to as the Christ, the Messiah, reinforcing the notion that John already knows Jesus' identity as the saviour for whom they'd been waiting. But seeds of doubt have crept in. Thankfully, instead of letting the doubts stew or fester, John sends two of his disciples to simply ask: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

John's doubt and question makes a great deal of sense when we remember his earlier vision of the coming saviour. The powerful one who was coming would baptize with Spirit and fire, a winnowing fork is in his hand, he would clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary, burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. But that was not what Jesus had been doing! Jesus had been busy with acts of compassion. Jesus had performed miracles of healing for a Roman officer, for women and for any who came to him. Jesus calmed a storm, encouraged his disciples to risk seeking new horizons and had taken on the opposition rising against his acts of mercy and grace. Jesus gave sight to blind men, restored a girl to life and cast out demons who

were destroying a man's life. In a word... no fiery judgement anywhere! Only miracles and healing and life. This is not what John was expecting and so even though he already knows Jesus' identity as the Messiah, John is confused and doubt creeps in.

Jesus' way of dealing with John's doubt is simply to ask John's disciples to point out to John all that Jesus had been doing. If I was John, I'm not sure I'd be satisfied with Jesus' response, but for the gospel story as a whole, it is enough. We never learn of John's reaction - whether his doubt is assuaged and his faith restored. Instead, Jesus turns to the crowds to tell them about John. John may have a doubt or two about Jesus, but Jesus has no doubt about John. John is a prophet, yes, Jesus assures the crowds, and more than a prophet. Jesus interprets John's life and message as the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies that a special messenger would precede the coming of the Messiah. John's doubt about Jesus' identity was no barrier for Jesus to be confident in John's identity.

This story today, is a beautiful story of love and of grace. It is a good story for the middle of Advent when, like John, we might wonder if the confident hope with which we began this new church year might have been premature. We are a long way from the first heady days of preparation when we embrace the sure hope that God is indeed coming again. And fulfillment has yet to arrive. The saviour for whom we yearn is not yet here. And so it's easy for doubt to creep in... and for that doubt to grow if the anticipated coming salvation doesn't look or act like what we expect! A powerful saviour bringing fiery judgement makes sense. A baby in an out of the way stable, born to poor parents... makes much less sense as the Incarnation of the Creator of the Universe. Salvation could be easy to miss or mistake. And so we need to keep our hearts open, our minds alert and our spirits attentive.

The joy of today is that even when we question or doubt, Jesus knows who we really are. Jesus knows our faith and our love, probably more than we do. And it is out of this confidence in our status as forgiven children of God that Jesus calls us to repent. There is nothing to fear, for when Jesus comes, 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. As we see these mercies lived out around us, and lived out within us, may our faith be strengthened and our hope restored. May we know the joy of everlasting life not only when we die, but each and every day from now until the Messiah comes.