

Third Sunday in Advent – 2019

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-11

Matthew 11:2-15

John didn't expect to be in prison. He was faithful. He was just. And John the Baptist was in prison. He had accurately identified the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. The Messianic King had come, and John was in prison. Dark, dank, and filthy – the greatest Prophet was captive and his world was a-jumble.

Faith needs God's Word. Faith needs God's uplifting, grace-laden, and wholesome Word. Alone, John's head was spinning. Doubts and fears – this man was subject to them just the same as you. The events that surrounded him didn't compute, didn't reassure, didn't adapt to his preconceptions. The new era had arrived. God has sent His Christ. All the prophetic announcements were to be realized. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and bloom like the crocus (Isaiah 35:1). What could be drier than the nation Israel, under the iron fist of Rome and 400 years without a new revelation from God? John was to prepare the way, and Herod had him locked away, silencing the one who pricked Herod's conscience. Make no mistake – John hurt. Isolation is one thing; bewilderment is quite another. When faith's certainty leaves your heart, you hurt.

John needed God's word. Like plants need water. Like the earth needs the sun. Like the stomach needs food – John needed the hear the Word. Even in prison, he could hear what God was doing. Out goes the request, the SOS, the plea for strength: John sent word by his disciples to the Lord Christ – are you the One? “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Remember, John is a forceful man of God. His devotion is astounding. His passion is next level... and he was despairing. The question tells of his humanity. Had God forsaken him? Was he wrong about the Messianic King? Why is this horrible situation continuing?

Do you know that feeling? Have you asked that question? From a hospital room, from the depths of depression, addiction, in the face of some failure, in the midst of a family, personal, or professional crisis? Aren't you the One? Why have I devoted myself to You and I still suffer this pain? Pain and sin and feeling like a failure can blow colossal doubt into the stoutest of hearts. Brilliant John, beautiful John, magnificent John – he sent word asking. He took his spiritual pulse and sent out a request for aid. John needed God's Word and he went directly to Christ for it. Times will come when you will be where John the Baptist was. This world is full of prisons. The sin you commit that haunts you, (your sin) that is in someone's eyes when they look at you – that is a prison. The sin that is committed against you, over and over. The prison of a lie that you must keep up. Times of emotional distress where confusion darkens your road and the most certain things lose their moorings in your mind – where the whole world becomes dark and dank and filthy.

Christianity is not a hobby for the affluent. Christianity is not an academic pursuit for the super intellectual. Christianity is not a feather in the morally superior's cap. Our faith is for everyman, every woman – all of us who endure a broken creation and long for God's grace, God's purity and God's kingdom. That's why Christ was incarnated, why God became man. He is present for

us, near, bringing His goodness into the lives of people who hurt, who need to be elevated above the rat race, the pig pen, the lion's den. You will not get through this life without facing difficulty, prison of one sort or another. Each of you has faith and you have the ability to take your spiritual pulse. If it's weak, you know where aid is. It is most certainly here!

Jesus heard of John's distress. And He sends courage. But He is a teacher, a Savior who knows our souls. Sometimes a teacher says: $2+2=4$. Sometimes a teacher says: $2+2=...$? On one occasion, Jesus told those who were listening to Him: "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). That was the teacher saying: $2+2=4$. On another occasion Jesus said: "Who do men say that I am?" That was the Teacher leading His disciples to discover what $2+2$ equaled. When John's disciples come with the Baptist's question, the Teacher did not flat out say: "Yes, I am the One." Saying $2+2=4$ in this instance would not be an aid to John's faith. He rather points them to the signs, opening their eyes (and John's) to the clear indications that provide the answer to John's question.

Stand up and take notice: "The signs are unmistakable." Jesus was doing for John exactly what He does for each of us, exactly what is written in Isaiah 35. "Strengthen weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God he will come and save you'" (Isaiah 35:3-4). The Lord Christ has come. What does that do to our feeble knees? We grow strong, confident, equipped to stand in the face of adversity, knowing that God saves us, brings us out of this world to the Promised Land of Heaven. Our weak hands become strong with grace, with purpose. We are Christ's disciples. We are sons and daughters of light. We have more than this world, more than the winter of our storms, more than what the world lives for.

The Teacher reminded John of the signs. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear. Signs... $2+2=...$? John put it together. And so do you. You are hearers of the Word, the Gospel which claims your heart, your mind, and your soul. Strong, you are a believer of the crucified and risen King. You know that the era of grace is all around us. You know that you are more than flesh and blood, more than a cosmic accident, more than the impulses that run through your brain. You are of such value that your Creator took upon Himself your flesh and bone and lived under the law, serving others with His divine love, rendering Himself up on a cross to pay for your sin. You are esteemed, valued, by God Himself. Faith makes you strong – to meet your challenges and help others with theirs. The Teacher has crafted your faith – leading you through His word to identify what sacrifice plus resurrection equals.

Our present challenge is that the church at large is diminishing, numerically, in our age. The new generation is turning to vain paths to find meaning, direction. You will hear some calling the traditional church outdated, tired – that our faith is archaic and obscure. It is a prison that they are in and they are inviting you to join them, in that place. Count on this: during this challenge the pulpit which you are listening to now will echo St. Paul: "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ and Him crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). We have seen the signs. Two thousand years of church history. Here I stand; I can do no other. By Grace I'm Saved! Grace Free and Boundless! A Mighty Fortress Is Our God – a shield for believers in every age and in every

place. We have seen the signs. Loved ones who have died confessing the faith. Children baptized in the font, the womb of the church, reborn into Christ's kingdom. Our knees are strengthened by God's Word, preached into our souls. We know who we are. We are beloved of Christ the King. He ventured into our prison and set us free, using the crimson key of His holy blood. John the Baptist, knowing he was truly free, John rendered up His life in faith. He is our brother, a member of our church, and we have His faith for Christ is our Teacher as well.

As you approach this altar, know in your heart... Jesus is the One; We are the blessed for we certainly are not offended by Him, by His cross. Quite the contrary – we receive His body with thanksgiving, we receive His blood with joy. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold, your King is coming to you; righteous and having salvation.