

Sermon preached by
The Reverend William J. Eakins
At St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
On December 15, 2019, The Third Sunday of Advent, Year A

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

Well, no wonder John was puzzled. He had been so confident about what God was going to do. "Repent and prepare the way of the Lord" had been John's urgent proclamation. The Messiah was going to come with judgment to separate the good folks from the bad folks like a farmer separates the wheat from the chaff. The good wheat would be gathered into the storehouse; the worthless chaff burned in unquenchable fire. So repent! Clean up your life so that judgment will not fall upon you. John had also been very sure that Jesus was the very Messiah that God had sent to carry out this divine judgment. Had not John heard a voice from heaven saying about Jesus, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased?"

But now a short time later, John is uncertain he had heard aright. In the prison cell where John has been locked up after getting himself in trouble with the authorities, John listens anxiously for news about what Jesus, God's Chosen One, is doing. And what John hears is not what he had expected. Where is the promised Day of Judgment? Where are the thunderbolts of divine intervention, the fire of divine punishment? Jesus isn't denouncing the tax collectors, harlots, and other sinners; he is sitting down to have supper with them. What's going on here? And so John starts to think: perhaps I was wrong about you, Jesus. Maybe that voice I heard at your Baptism didn't come from heaven after all but was merely the whistling of the wind. So John sends messengers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come or must we wait for another?"

There's a very good reason why we need to hear this story of John the Baptist's bewilderment and discouragement as we head into the Christmas season. Truth be told, we sometimes are very much like John, that puzzled, questioning servant of God of long ago. We too know what it is like to feel disappointed, let down, and depressed even at this very time of the year when we are supposed to be full of Christmas cheer.

Christmas is a season of great expectations. The Christmas angels proclaim peace on earth and good will, and we would dearly like to experience that peace and good will in our hearts and in our homes. We go to great lengths, cooking special foods, trimming trees, putting up wreaths, shopping for just the right presents for everybody on our list - all in hopes of having the best Christmas ever. But doesn't our actual experience often fall short of what we had hoped for? We get exhausted and irritable, the relatives and family get into squabbles, fuss over what they will eat and not eat; not everybody is grateful for the gifts we have given them. Then we turn on the news and hear about impeachment proceedings, people being shot in a kosher market by a crazy racist, and a college freshman being stabbed near her campus. And we start to wonder if Christmas and the Good News it proclaims is really all it's cracked up to be. "Are you the One we expected, Jesus, or should we look for someone else?"

Now when John the Baptist asks his question, the answer Jesus gives is simple. He tells John to look at what is going on. Jesus says there are amazing things happening that John is not noticing: blind people are receiving their sight, people who haven't walked in years are skipping and running, deaf folks are swapping stories, untouchable lepers are hugging their children, and the poor are hearing news that makes them smile. It is all straight out of the Book of the prophet Isaiah, the promise of what happens when God's power is stirred up and comes among us with great might.

Jesus is saying to John: Think again, my friend. You aren't getting the big picture of what God is doing. You, John have focused on a message of repentance, and repentance is necessary because it opens people's hearts to recognize their need of God's love and mercy. And God's love and mercy is just what I, Jesus, have come to bring. As God's Chosen One, I have come to fulfill God's promises of old: I have come to give sight to the blind, to open deaf ears, to bring the dead to life, and to preach the Good News of God's love to all who are poor in spirit. So, John, the word of God is not as you supposed, "Repent, lest you be judged," but "Repent and receive with joy God's redeeming work."

Could it be that we, and not just John the Baptist, need to grow in our understanding of the new order that Jesus Christ ushers in?

There certainly are Christians who are more ready to sound the note of God's condemnation than to herald the good news of God's compassion and mercy. Recently a Roman Catholic priest refused Holy Communion to a parishioner, ironically a prominent judge, because she married to another woman. And not so many years ago, grieving parents in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, received letters from avowedly Christian people telling them that their children had been shot as God's punishment for the sins of their parents. Putting such extremists aside, however, we all have a lot to learn about God's goodness and faithfulness. As the old hymn reminds us, "there's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea.... For the love of God is broader than the measure of [our] mind and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind."

Why does God allow war and injustice to continue? Why does God allow innocent people to suffer and evildoers to prosper? Perhaps it is because God is incredibly more patient with the creation than we can imagine. Perhaps in divine forbearance, God's timetable of redemption is slow but nonetheless sure. Perhaps we would do better to focus more closely on the signs of God's Kingdom breaking into our world than on the evidence of human sinfulness. And the signs of God's presence and power are all around us.

"Look," says Jesus, "the poor have good news brought to them." Well the good news today is that the number of people living in extreme poverty is in steep decline. Thirty years ago, 35% of the global population was living in extreme poverty. Today that number has decreased to 10%. Thanks to better education, better health care, improved infrastructure, roads and electrification, and employment opportunities brought about by the growth of the global economy, billions of the world's poorest people have been given a higher standard of living. The global improvement in income is mirrored in our own country where the jobless rate is at its lowest in fifty years.

"Look," says Jesus, "the dead are raised." It is happening in New Haven where a former gang leader named William Outlaw, is working with men newly released from prison. Outlaw grew up in a slum, dropped out of school, joined a street gang called the Jungle Boys, got involved with drugs and a homicide and was locked up in some of the most violent prisons in the country. But one day Outlaw met an extraordinary social worker who somehow managed to cut through Outlaw's tough exterior and establish a relationship of trust. This social worker challenged Outlaw to confront his anger and bitterness and consider reconstructing his life. Miraculously, Outlaw did; he decided he wanted his future to be different from his past. When he was released after serving 21 years in prison, Outlaw went to work to transform the lives of gang members on the streets of New Haven, men who are just like he used to be. And his work is paying off.

"Look," says Jesus, "the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear." It is happening right here at St. John's Church in ESOL, the English for Speakers of Other Languages Program. Strangers who have come here from across the world are learning English, the language that will enable them to hear and understand and to communicate their own thoughts and needs to others. Foreigners are being transformed into neighbors and fellow citizens.

As God promised long ago through the prophet Isaiah, “my word shall accomplish my purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” God’s Word IS at work here, in this world. Open your eyes, your ears, your mind and your heart in this Christmas season before us and let your faith be renewed.

In a few minutes as we baptize Quinn Scarlett Goulet, you will renew your own baptismal covenant and promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. You will be charged to tell the story to Quinn as she grows in faith and to all the world that has not yet heard it. So open your eyes to see those working for justice and peace among all peoples; open your hands to support those who seek and serve Christ in all persons, and open your hearts to be changed by the signs of God’s Kingdom that abound. Then go and keep your promise and go tell it on the mountain - go tell that Good News to all the world.-