"When Our Hope Falters, God Is Still at Work"

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Matthew 11:1-11 (NRSVUE)

Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach
and proclaim his message in their cities.
[2] When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples [3] and
said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" [4] Jesus answered
them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: [5] the blind receive their sight, the lame walk,
those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good
news brought to them. [6] And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."
[7] As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into
the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? [8] What, then, did you go out to see?
Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. [9] What,
then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. [10] This is the
one about whom it is written,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'
[11] "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist,
yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Last week, we explored the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. Specifically, we focused on Zechariah's encounter with the angel who foretold John's birth. This week, we turn our attention to John.

John the Baptist figures prominently in the readings for Advent as the one who prepared the way for the coming of Christ. But we're going to fast forward through much of his story, because our focus this week is not on his life or even on his ministry, but on his reflection at the end of his life.

You may recall that when the angel told Zechariah the miraculous news that they would have a child, Zechariah was dubious. In response, he was struck mute by the angel. When he regained his voice, he sang about the role his son would play in the divine story of redemption:

> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
> for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
> to give his people knowledge of salvation
> by the forgiveness of their sins. (Luke 1:76-77)

John, indeed, became the prophet of the Most High, the forerunner of Christ, the one who proclaimed the coming Messiah. But he was, let's just say, "rough around the edges." According to the description in the Gospel of Matthew, John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather

belt around his waist. He scavenged for food, eating locusts and wild honey. And yet, people journeyed to the wilderness in droves to hear him. He delivered a no-holds-barred critique of the political and religious establishment, but also harangued his listeners for their sinful behavior and warned them to repent. He baptized people in the river, a symbolic cleansing for the forgiveness of their sins. He insisted that while he baptized with water, one who was coming after him would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire." John had even baptized Jesus himself, though as far as we know he never saw Jesus face-to-face again.

Now, things have changed. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and John's favorite target for moral skewering, has finally caught up with John. He is in prison, awaiting Herod's judgment and likely execution. Locked in a cold and gloomy cell, John reflects on his prophetic message and his role in the greater story. He has followed what people have said about Jesus and his ministry, that he is traveling about the countryside with a group of disciples teaching and healing. And yet, Herod is still in power, the people are still oppressed, and John himself is behind bars. He begins to wonder what it was all for and if, perhaps, he backed the wrong horse.

So, John sends messengers to Jesus to ask him bluntly: *Are you the Messiah, or should we keep waiting for someone else?*

Do you ever wonder in your own life if what you do makes a difference? Maybe you've been trying for years to repair a fractured relationship in your family, playing peacemaker between family members who seem to have no interest in patching things up. Maybe you have a child who struggles with mental or emotional health, and you worry whether they will ever become resilient enough to stand fully on their own. Maybe you're concerned about your neighborhood, frustrated at a lack of civic pride and wondering how to get people to care. Maybe you volunteer at a local food pantry, striving to help people have enough to eat, but seeing the need continue to grow month after month. Perhaps you're a person who loves your church, but you wonder what it will take to get more people to come, to get involved in the ministry, to pass on faith to the next generation, or simply to keep the place standing.

When we look around us, we see so many problems, so much need – things we thought we'd never see in our lifetime, things we hoped would be solved in our lifetimes. Will there ever be peace in the Middle East? Why are we still battling racism in this country? Or gender equality? How did fascism manage to make a comeback, and why do so many people seem to be untroubled by it? What can we do about climate change if environmental protections are continually rolled back while global temperatures continue to climb, water levels rise, and arable lands disappear? Why does the income gap keep growing, and why do we have such an uneven and unjust system of taxation? How can we embrace modernity without compromising our values? With all the misinformation being shared and the increasing sophistication of technology, is it even possible to know what is real and what is not? As politics becomes more about rhetoric and ideology and less about solving real world problems, is there any candidate we can trust? *And does any of it even matter?*

When John's messengers found Jesus, they asked him, "Are you the Messiah, or should we keep waiting for someone else?" Imagine being Jesus and receiving that question. Ouch. But Jesus didn't scold them for their lack of faith. He didn't correct their messianic misconceptions. He didn't ask for patience while he worked his system. He didn't offer platitudes or grand visions of how everything would work out in the end. He simply responded, "Tell John what you see and what you hear: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Now, John knew his scripture. He would have recognized echoes of Isaiah and Zechariah and Malachi in Jesus's words. But he would have also noted what was *not* spoken – the reunification of God's people, the restoration of the throne of David, the defeat of Israel's enemies.

Jesus was a different kind of messiah than many people expected, a different kind of messiah than we might expect today. I wonder if Jesus was also a very different kind of messiah than even *John* expected, even though he had announced his coming and prepared the people for his arrival. Did John expect a warrior? A populist firebrand who would ignite a revolution? Did he anticipate a divine intervention that would liberate the people by a miraculous, earth-shaking event? Even if he did understand Jesus's kingdom to be a spiritual one, was he looking for an instantaneous change that would spark repentance and revival across the land? Whatever his expectations, John was clearly underwhelmed by Jesus's ministry up to this point. He would have also noted another striking omission from the prophets in Jesus's description: *release to the captives.* John was *not* going to be rescued from prison.

The night before his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech that hauntingly foreshadowed the next day's events. King had achieved several successes in the Civil Rights movement – the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Birmingham Children's Crusade, the March on Washington, the passage of the Civil Rights Act. But he also suffered many losses in his personal life and the lives of his friends. He knew that, while much had changed, much had not. Black people still faced discrimination in the workplace and on the streets. Laws were still unequally applied, and too often violence was used to intimidate and maintain the status quo. Men like George Wallace and Strom Thurmond and Bull Connor still held power and influence. And yet, he remained hopeful. Invoking images of Moses at the end of his life, King said:

> I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.[1]

Dr. King knew that he would not live to see all of his dreams fulfilled, though he likely did not know how close he was to the end of his life. But that didn't negate his dreams or diminish the power of his vision. The dream would live on. It still lives on today – sometimes advancing,

sometimes retreating – but always alive and always before us. Environmentalist Wes Jackson said, “If your life’s work can be accomplished in your lifetime, you’re not thinking big enough.”

Dr. King once said that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”[2] That bend is not smooth. Rather than thinking of progress as linear, we need to see it as cyclical. There are ebbs and flows, peaks and valleys. Likewise, the incarnation didn’t end the story or set everything right. In many ways, the coming of Jesus was a disruption. And the world was forever changed. Not fixed, not completed, not restored; but changed. We continue to live into that reality, carrying on the work of Christ to transform the world. We may not see God’s work completed in our lifetimes, but that does not negate the value of the work – work in which we are invited to play a part.

Jesus didn’t establish an earthly kingdom. He didn’t restore the throne of David. He didn’t overthrow the Roman occupation. He pointed to a different way of living and invited us to share in that vision – a life of healing and wholeness, a life where the brokenhearted are comforted and the downtrodden are lifted up, a life of justice and righteousness and goodness and mercy. And he insisted that this dream is both a future hope and a present reality.

Right now, the world is a mess. And some days it all just seems too much to take. But as much as we might long for an escape, we cannot ignore reality; we need to stay informed and remain vigilant in our pursuit of justice and wholeness, to faithfully carry on the redemptive work of Christ. The power of this story isn’t that it happened once upon a time, but that it happens over and over. God is still inbreaking into our world. Incarnation still disrupts. Disruptions lead to change. And it is this very disruption that reminds us that God is not a disinterested observer. Though some days our hope falters, God is still at work.

This Advent, embrace a hope that is resilient. Commit to a vision that is too big for us to achieve. And **trust in the God who is still at work when our hope falters. May it be so. Amen.**

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