

Sermon: Highway of Doubts

Year A, Advent 3, Gaudete Sunday

[Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

One week and eight chapters ago, John the Baptizer was on the banks of the Jordan, speaking to the crowds who had come to hear him preach. The minister of an outdoor mega-church, he was speaking truth to power. He was saying *Prepare the way of the Lord* (Matthew 3:3) and *I baptize you with water for repentance, 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.* (Matthew 3:11) When Jesus asked John to baptize him, John said it should have been the other way round (Matthew 3:13).

Today, John sends his disciples to ask Jesus *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* (Matthew 11:3) What's changed? John is in prison now. John believed in repentance for sin and he named names. Herod Antipas, still brutally clawing his way through the Roman political power games, was still trying to be named king of Israel. The Romans had divided the province into four regions, each ruled by one of Herod's brothers. Herod had gone to Rome and ?fallen in love? with his brother's wife or perhaps he just wanted to take something his brother valued away. Herod had gotten her to divorce her husband. Herod had divorced his wife and married his brother's ex-wife. John the Baptizer called him on what John felt was immoral behavior. Now John was in jail. In the ancient world, jails were mostly holding pens, although you could be there a long time. Back then jails allowed the powerful to keep track of people until they were exonerated, exiled or executed.¹ John, the man who had lived in the wilderness, eating locusts and honey, was in an underground prison.² John knew there was no exoneration or exile in his future. Only execution waited for him.

This was just not the way it was supposed to be, especially when the Messiah, the Promised One, was in the world. John the Baptizer was a man of the desert. Here he was, underground, away from the air and the sky. He was supposed to be on that road, on that highway, that Holy Way. (Isaiah 35:8) He was supposed to be walking in the desert as it rejoiced and blossomed, like the crocus. (Isaiah 35:1). He had done so much, he had worked so hard, he had done more than the God of Israel had asked. He was supposed to be surrounded by a crowd coming to Zion with singing; everlasting joy upon their heads; everyone obtaining joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing fleeing away. (Isaiah 35:10). Herod Antipas, murdered of children, oppressor of the poor, lapdog of Rome, Jew in theory, but someone who ignored the Law of Moses, he wasn't supposed to win. Not with the Messiah walking across the land.

So John sends his question to Jesus. *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* (Matthew 11:3) Asking that question is such a sane and sensible response. Global climate change, Ebola, nuclear weapons. The rich keep getting richer while the poor get poorer and the middle has to fight harder and harder just to stay where they are. We're Christians and we coming up to the celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior and John's question just

¹William R. Herzog, "Advent 3, Exegetical Perspective, Matthew 11:2-11" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 69.

²William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Vol. 1. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975: 8.

makes a whole lot of sense. We're Christians and for the next two weeks most of the people we interact with, at work and as we live our daily lives, are going to be focused on the same bit of the Bible as we are, *For born this day in the city of David...* (Luke 2:11) At no other time of year does that happen. And yet, if we're honest, we too have doubts about Jesus when we look at the mess the world is in. *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* (Matthew 11:3)

We have all had prophets in our lives. For most of us, they don't show up in camel hair eating nothing but locusts and honey, but they're still prophets. They help us figure out what college to go to and what to major in once we're there. They tell us what kind of woman is going to make a good wife for us. They tell us that the Beatles are going to change music forever and in a good way, when no one in their generation is saying so. They tell us smoking is going to kill us and wells need to be at least 50' deep. They tell us truths that shape our lives.

In the third grade, I had just started wearing glasses. I only needed them for distance, so I didn't wear them all the time, which meant I lost them all the time. One day I told Miss Philbin that my mom had forgotten to put my glasses in my lunch box. She looked at me and asked, "Whose glasses are they? And whose lunch box is it? Maybe you need to be in charge of them, not your mother." I've never forgotten that. So much of my success in my corporate career was solving problems based on whose glasses and whose lunch box was really involved. Miss Philbin was a prophet for me.

Think for a minute of the prophets you have had in your lives. Your parents, your spouses, your kids. Your mentors at work. Great teachers. Wise neighbors. Maybe ministers. Just think for a minute of all the people you have had in your life trying to give you the knowledge you needed to stay on that highway in the desert, that Holy Way, that way that is so clear and plain that Isaiah says that *no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray* (Isaiah 35:8) [Pause]

And yet, even with all that wisdom at our disposal, we wonder if we are the fool that can't keep on the right track.³ And if it's not us, because honestly we've been giving it everything we had, then maybe we're on the wrong track not because we can't manage to follow the track, but because we're following the wrong guy. *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* (Matthew 11:3)

It's a reasonable question, given the way the world is, given how full of doubt and flaws we all are. Maybe at this time of year, when we're all a bit more tired than normal, when we're all feeling the pressure to "get into that holiday spirit", the doubts surface more easily. So notice what Jesus does with the question.

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. (Matthew 11:4-5). Jesus doesn't come down on John like a ton of bricks, "You used to believe and now you don't believe." Jesus doesn't say, "I'm the Messiah. That's all you need to know." He respects the doubts. He understands where the question is coming from. So instead of giving an answer, he gives a way to keep answering the question each time it arises. He asks his disciples, his followers, to reflect on what they hear and see. Hear and see? What about global

³Bruce C. Birch, "Advent 3, Exegetical Perspective, Isaiah 35:1-10" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 55.

warming and Ebola and nuclear weapons in the hands of lunatics. And don't talk to me about the happy, clappy story at the end of the news about a three legged kitten getting a new home just in time for the holidays! We all go there when we're asked what we hear and see.

Did you hear about the sixty year old woman helping a six year old take 20 minutes to pick out a \$2 gift for his dad from the Angel Loft of a church Christmas fair? Did you see the mound of gifts for four families that the forty families of a rural country church pulled together so there would be Christmas present on Christmas day? It's not enough. It's never enough. But it is there.

And it is there because the disciples of Jesus, the followers of Jesus, kept following Jesus even though they had doubts.⁴ Jesus knew everyone would have doubts, even someone as faithful and committed as John the Baptizer. John was willing to put his life on the line for his beliefs and he paid with his life. If John can have doubts, everyone can have doubts. But look carefully and there are signs that the Kingdom is breaking forth.

The other part of Jesus' reply to the doubts is to ask what we were looking for, what we were expecting. Were we expecting the ones who change direction every time the wind blows to suddenly stand firm? Were we expecting the rich and the powerful to close up shop because the Messiah was in the world? No, we were looking for a prophet when we went into the wilderness. A prophet is not someone who sees into the future, but someone who sees under the present, to see what is really going on. All the prophets we have had in our lives were trying to get us to that underlying truth, that more solid foundation on which to build our lives.

Jesus is confident that his disciples are going to have doubts, questions, fears. When he says *blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me* (Matthew 11:6), the literal translation is "blessed is anyone who is not caused to stumble"⁵. Go ahead and doubt. But keep going. It's not a stumble if you keep going.

As Christians, we live in an inbetween world. The Messiah is in the world and the Kingdom is breaking forth. But the Kingdom has not yet arrived. We sing *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* and he has already come, but the world has not yet changed.

In this whirlwind season when we are ironing shirts during the 11:00pm news and doubting whether it's really worth it, Jesus is urging us to trust our eyes and ears. Maybe we can back off a little with all the stuff on our to-do lists. But when we watch for the places where the Kingdom is breaking forth, we see what the prophets who have shaped us were pointing at. *For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.* (Isaiah 35:6-7, 9-10)

⁴Lisa M. Bowens, "The Role of John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel." *Word & World* 30, no. 3 (2010): 316.

⁵Sherman E. Johnson, "The Gospel According to St. Matthew: Exegesis," vol. 7 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1951), 380.