

“Doubting John”

Introduction: So far in this advent season our texts have directed us toward the themes of peace and hope. For this, the third Sunday in advent, the theme of joy is before us. However, joy, I am aware, can be a difficult theme for many to brush up alongside. For many, given the struggles and circumstances in their lives, belting out a couple of choruses of “Joy to the World,” or understanding the tidings of comfort and joy that those old merry gentlemen seemed to rest in, just doesn’t seem possible.

This season may be the first that some have gone through without a loved one. This season may bring up the reality of dysfunction within a family and the pain of being together, or not, during the holidays. This season may seem dominated by a fear of economic or political uncertainty. Whatever the reason, joy seems far away; many cannot wait for this season to end.

If you find yourself feeling this way, perhaps this fellow named John might be a helpful traveling companion. You’ve heard of “doubting Thomas,” the disciple of Jesus who struggled with the resurrection of Jesus. Well, today we’ll meet “doubting John.” John is struggling with the life of Jesus. For a time, John was all about Jesus, telling as many people as would listen that the rescuer of the world had come, until, that is, John ended up in prison. Then, John began to wonder if Jesus was really the one he claimed to be, or if he, and the world, should be expecting someone else.

The fact of the matter is that what we want from Jesus is not always what we get. Can we accept and love Jesus as he is, rather than as we would like him to be? Can his companionship with us bring us joy, not what we expect him to do for us?

I. The Call of John

A. Let’s begin by reintroducing ourselves to John. Typically, we meet him in this advent season for his birth was a part of the significant events leading up to the birth of Jesus. John was the miracle son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, an elderly couple who had been childless for their entire marriage. This had been extremely puzzling to them as they had lived righteous and devout and prayerful lives. Certainly, if anyone deserved to have a child, it was them. But nothing. Then, one day, when Zechariah was carrying out his duties in the temple as a priest, he was met by an angel. Understandably, Zechariah was a bit freaked out. But the angel told him not to fear. God had heard their prayer and they would be having a son. This son would not only be a joy to them, he would be a joy to the people of Israel because he was going to come with a special call: “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk. 1:17). John would be preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah, for Jesus.

B. You know how the story continues. Zechariah didn’t believe this could happen. He was an old man, he reminded the angel, his wife was an old woman, and, well, it just didn’t seem like a good recipe for making a child! So, God struck Zechariah dumb so he could think more about it; he didn’t speak again until John was born. Then, Zechariah burst into a song that was filled with the Spirit:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets long ago), salvation from our enemies and all who hate us, to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to

rescue us from our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

There is much talk, notice, about being rescued, finally, from enemies by this savior who was to come. God would hand out his judgment. His people would be vindicated. The yoke of Roman oppression would be lifted. Joy was in the air! Zechariah was singing because his son John was the one who was going to get folk ready for this divine intervention. But as events went on, it would turn out that there would be a bit of a gap between expectations and reality.

II. Caught Between Expectations and Reality

A. What we hear is that as John undertook his calling, he was a fierce and fiery preacher. He went out into the wilderness, dressed as one of the prophets of old, with clothing of camel's hair cinched with a leather belt. He lived simply, on locusts and wild honey, and called people to repent. Whole bunches of people went out to hear him. They confessed their sin and were baptized by him in the Jordan River. When the religious elite also came out to hear him, John got a bit testy, wondering why they had come. "You'd better be serious about this," John declared. "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance...The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down (remember last week, Isa. 10:33-34?!) and thrown into the fire."

B. John became so bold in calling for people to make Godly, life changes, that at one point he confronted a king named Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great) with an issue of immorality in his life. Herod didn't like being so challenged by John and so had him thrown into prison. This was not what John expected! God was going to come and set the prisoners free, the prophets of old had promised (Isa. 61:1). As John languished in prison, he heard that Jesus was in the vicinity preaching, teaching, and doing good deeds. Something didn't add up. If Jesus was so powerful, if the enemies of Israel were going to be defeated, if people who didn't make life changes were going to be judged, why was none of that happening and why was he, John, in prison?! So, John sent some friends who had come to visit him with a message for Jesus: "Are you the one to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Illustration: I'm reminded of an old Ziggy cartoon, reflecting on the promise of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "The meek shall inherit the earth." The cartoon pictures Ziggy praying to God with these words: "I just want to let you know that the meek are still getting clobbered down here!"

On a more serious note, there was the cry of Martha, and then her sister Mary, upon the death of their brother Lazarus. To Jesus, who didn't arrive to help until Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days, the sisters exclaimed: "Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died." In other words, "If you possess God's power in this world and you love this man, why didn't you save him from dying?"

C. Each of us, I think, asks this question in our own way. What we want is a God who rescues us, who brings about justice and goodness in our personal lives now, and not just promises such in our future. We want a God, who acts visibly now, in our life, and who doesn't let us, or those that we love, get sick and die. The thing is, what we expect from Jesus is not always what we get.

John was expecting the vengeance of God. John was expecting a savior who would come with force, with national liberation as his goal, someone who would take on and take down the abusive and powerful religious and political elite. It's not that such would never come, but something else needed to

come first, and is still coming. What came in Jesus was someone who began to work at the margins, healing the sick, ministering to the poor, calling people to love their enemies and do good to those who hated them. Jesus was about restoring outcasts into society, about reviving community, about giving foretastes of what God's new creation would be like, and about offering folk the opportunity to sign up. And even when they put him on the cross, instead of coming down and declaring "now it's payback time," Jesus just said, "Father, forgive them...." And then the Father let his Son die.

III. Finding Joy in Jesus

A. How, then do we find joy when it seems as if our world has been rocked? Sometimes, we try to find joy by creating a Jesus of our own longing. The government of Cuba once distributed paintings of Jesus with an automatic rifle slung over his shoulder. Norm Evans, a former lineman for the Miami Dolphins football team, pictures Jesus as a 6' 6" 300-pound defensive tackle who always makes the big plays. Much of modern biblical scholarship, which doesn't like to think of our sin as being so offensive to God that it took the sacrifice of Jesus to remove it, has whittled Jesus down to nothing more than a peasant cynic or first-century hippie. The thing is, if we create a Jesus of our own longing, we'll never meet the real one.

B. Better is to consider Jesus' answer to John (Ma. 11:4-6):

Go back, and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed in anyone who does not stumble on account of me.

What came in Jesus was the beginning of the fulfillment of the picture of everlasting joy found in Isaiah 35, from which Jesus quotes. It's a picture of fertility, life and healing as the kingdom of God breaks into our world. In the ministry Jesus was carrying out, this is what was beginning to happen. But John, and others, and maybe ourselves, can miss it when we stumble over our own circumstances and desires, or with what we think Jesus should be doing. When that happens, we miss what God is actually doing, and we miss the companionship of the God who promises not only one day to lead us into green pastures, but in the meantime, to walk with us through the valley of the shadows, whatever those shadows may be. His presence, even in difficult circumstances, is the comfort and joy that we need. Jesus doesn't give us what we want; he goes one better and gives us himself.

Christmas helps to redirect our thinking, for, beginning with the birth of Jesus, we see a God revealed to us who comes alongside us, sharing our flesh, our fears and our tears, walking with us through thick and thin, and ultimately giving up his life for us so that we can know, despite our circumstances, despite all that Satan may throw at us, that God is with us. That is where real joy begins.

I'm not sure we need to know that as much as we need to experience it. So, let us pray that God would open our eyes, that we might see him with us, and that his companionship would bring us the joy for which we long.