



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 14, 2025

ISAIAH 35:1-10; CANTICLE 15; JAMES 5:7-10; MATTHEW 11:2-11

A SERMON FOR SUNDAY

Mathew 11:2-11 *[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?" Jesus answered them, "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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." 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? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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.' "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."]*

It is a delight to be with you this morning. St. Mark's Cathedral has provided wonderful hospitality to us in the Lutheran community on repeated occasions. I want to personally thank Dean Thomason for that. You have helped us to experience St. Mark's as a cathedral for Lutherans as well as for Episcopalians and, therefore, it's a delight to enjoy your hospitality again this morning.

It's an added delight to be here today because a special anniversary date is coming. Twenty-five years ago this coming January 6, The Episcopal Church and The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America entered into full communion with each other. On that day, the Feast of the

Epiphany in 2001, our two denominations adopted a joint statement entitled, Called to Common Mission, and over these past 25 years, Lutherans and Episcopalians have worked together at the national level, at the diocesan and synod level, and at the parish level. Therefore, in celebration of that unity, it is a joy to be with you today.

John the Baptist is back on the scene again today for the second time in this Advent season. Last Sunday, you will remember, everything was going great for John. Thousands of people from all over Judea were coming out to see John preaching and baptizing at the Jordan River. "It's happening!" shouted John. "Prepare the way of the Lord! God is coming to restore

Israel and Jesus will bring joy and justice to all God's people."

However, today, eight chapters later in Matthew's Gospel, John has been thrown into prison by Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas was the Jewish puppet ruler installed by the Romans to rule in Galilee. He was notoriously corrupt. While 90% of the people of Galilee lived in extreme poverty, Herod taxed them relentlessly and built lavish palaces for himself along the Galilean shore. Herod had also seduced his brother's wife, Herodias, and talked her into marrying him, even though she was Herod's niece. All of this was clearly in violation of Jewish law. So, John the Baptist publicly denounced Herod for being both unjust and immoral. And Herod did what rulers do; he threw John into prison.

That's the background for our Gospel lesson today where John, from prison, sends messengers to Jesus saying, "Are you the promised One or do we have to wait for another? We've been counting on you, Jesus, to make everything better. But everything is getting worse. How can we keep hope alive?"

I suspect that's a question not just for John the Baptist, but for a lot of us today.

When we find ourselves imprisoned in a painful and disintegrating world, how do we keep hope alive?

I like staying up on the news and one of my habits is to read the news each morning as I eat breakfast. However, I am aware of

how relentlessly depressing the news has been each day for weeks and months and years. You may have different reactions than I do. Every one of us has our own views about politics, society and the economy. But, I am struck by the parallels between Herod and John's story and our story today.

Herod seduced his niece, extorted tax money to enrich himself, and threw his critics into prison. Which world leader today comes to mind when you hear about that? Which world leader or leaders has a record of sexual abuse, uses the power of their office to bring hundreds of million dollars into their family bank account, and who pardons felons while imprisoning their critics? If John the Baptist were here today, who would he be talking to and what would he say?

What makes this more complicated, however, is that we can't just blame all of our despair on government leaders. As a people, as a planet, we are splitting apart. As a society, we struggle to talk to each other. If we spot any differences between us, we so quickly name each other as enemies and resort to violence. Those are our collective struggles. At the same time, many of us carry our own personal struggles: with illness, family crises, financial concerns, loneliness.

So, John's question keeps coming up: When we find ourselves trapped in despair, how do we keep hope alive?

Advent provides some guidance with this.

First, Advent encourages us to name our despairs. We think of Advent as a time of expectant joy, and it is that. But, as John the Baptist did in our text, Advent also encourages us to name our despairs. Advent moves us to feel everything that our hearts are feeling and to get those feelings and wounds out on the table where they are open to healing.

Secondly, Advent teaches us that hope is both a gift and a choice. Hope is not something we have to produce ourselves. Hope is, first, a gift from God. The Good News is that all of the things we most clearly need: wisdom, courage, strength, faith... these are all gifts that God stirs up in our hearts, including hope. But hope is like a musical instrument. To play it, we have to practice it. Hope comes as a gift, but to sustain it, we have to consciously choose to practice it. Let me give you an example of that.

A few years back I was at a workshop where one of the presenters was a Lutheran pastor from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Central Africa. The presenter was in fact the first woman to ever be ordained as a Lutheran Pastor in the DRC, and after serving two large rural congregations for a number of years, she was chosen by the Lutheran World Federation to be the director of our Central Africa hunger program. Like your Episcopal Relief and Development program, the Lutheran hunger program

includes not just food distribution, but also provides new agricultural methods to farmers, builds new wells and water distribution systems for hundreds of villages, gives interest-free loans to women in villages to start up new businesses and better feed their children. The results are phenomenal. Literally a hundred thousand more children stay alive each year and grow into healthy adults.

During the Question-and-Answer time after the presentation, someone asked the pastor, "Your programs are achieving such great results. Do you feel optimistic about the future of Central Africa?"

She thought for a moment and then said, "I do not use the word 'optimistic'. The problems facing Africa are so monumental that 'optimistic' seems like too shallow of a word. What I would say is that I am insistently hopeful. I insist on trusting that the God who stirred new life in Mary of Nazareth can stir new life in us. I insist on trusting that the God who raised Jesus from death on Easter is the God who has power over every deadly force that imprisons us as well, including violence and injustice. And so, in my prayers," she said, "I regularly remind God of what God has promised us. But then I keep a look out for where God is already doing life-giving things around me and I jump in to work with God to make them happen."

To say it again, hope is always a gift and a choice. Right now as we worship, we

receive hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. But then, when you and I walk out of here this morning, we are faced with a choice: do we stay imprisoned in our despair and the cynicism and numbness brought on by despair, or do we choose to practice acts of hope?

What does that mean for you and me to practice hope? It means to listen to our hearts and pay attention to what our hearts are longing and hoping for, and then to jump in and work with God to make those hopes happen.

If you hope for more peace in the world, then commit yourself to being a peacemaker. Help people to start talking to each other.

If you hope for justice and fairness in the world, then practice being very fair in all your dealings at your office, with your family.

What do you hope for as you sit here this morning? What do you hope for in your relationships... with your health... in your own spiritual path and sense of well-being.

Advent encourages us to keep our eyes open to where God is already stirring us to hope and then to jump in and work with God to make those hopes happen?

When John the Baptist was caught in despair, Jesus said to the messengers, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.' Jesus would add today, "Go and tell John what the people of St. Mark's are doing!"

Our choice to work with God and practice hope become the holy signs that bring hope to others.

God bless you as you walk through this time of Advent. God give you open ears and hearts, and fill you with the Spirit of life. And may God gather all of us, ...Episcopalians, Lutherans, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, ...may God gather all of us into the one Beloved Community where we share the meal and live the new life that God breathes through us each day. In Jesus' name. Amen



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