

Advent 3
Matthew 11:2-11
December 10-11, 2011

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here we are: overweight, in debt over our heads, and depressed. Here we are: divorced, lonely, afraid, worried about the future, addicted, and lonely. Here we are: self-righteous, hypocrites, liars.

And there is John the Baptist, that contrary, extreme figure of yore, in camel's hair coat, with locusts and honey upon his breath, a wild man with a wild look in his eye and a pointing finger. Mama's rules don't apply to prophets.

And here we are. *What good is John?* His scathing rebukes don't help. They just hurt. *Who does he think that he is?* He is no better than us! Oh, greatest of those born of women, fine! But he still had a mother, he still inherited from her the corruption and death of sin that infects us all. Here we are: running, hiding, evading, covering, attacking.

And there is John, born into a priestly family from a dead, barren womb, the last of the prophets, the Voice crying in the wilderness, the usher and baptizer of Christ. His Office is as simple as it is impossible: prepare the hearts of men for the Messiah. He is to comfort them by destroying them, tearing down the mountains of pride, building up the debased and dejected, calling them on their warfare with God and their guilt. All this that He might level that accusing finger at Mary's Son and give the Church a new song: **"Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."** In Him, by Him, your warfare is ended, your guilt removed. He does not wither and fade. His promises do not go unfulfilled. His Word is true. He will feed, gather, carry, and lead you.

And thus John winds up in prison. He was no more successful or popular than the prophets before him. His stern, unbending message had cost him. The powers that be would not tolerate his demand for repentance. They balked at his damnation of their impurity. They thought they were above doctrinal review and rebuke. So they resorted to violence. They imprisoned him and they would kill him. From that dungeon, from death row, cries the Voice of Faith. He asks: ***“Are You the Coming One, or do we await another?”***

Was John, that icon of conviction, that stern desert preacher, that demander of true repentance, doubting? Perhaps. Perhaps this reed not swayed by the opinions and pressures of men, this uncompromising prophet, this greatest of those born of women, was having a moment of weakness, a nagging doubt about what was happening and why he had been forced to give up his duties for a prison cell. Or maybe the wait itself had finally gotten to him. *Exactly why was his Divine Cousin waiting so long?* The Kingdom of God is at hand - get at it! It is not hard to see that between the prison food and the precarious guillotine over his head, John had plenty to bring him down. Worst of all scenarios, though, is the thought that might have plagued him that he had somehow made a mistake, that the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove and the Father's booming Voice out of heaven, were but a drunken dream, that Jesus wasn't the Messiah, the One coming to make atonement for the sins of the world.

Here we are. There is John. And perhaps we aren't so different after all. John had his problems, too. I don't know what they were. Maybe his parents were fought. Maybe his girlfriend left him. Maybe he had a habit that he couldn't break. His flesh, like ours, was no more durable than the grass of the fields and his heart, too, was blackened by lust, greed, and hate. And yet, still, in the midst of trouble, from inside Herod's prison, with his own personal package of weaknesses and sins, he had faith. He, who leaped in his mother's womb for the joy of God in Mary's womb, believed that Jesus had the answers. He does not sit back in his prison cell and think on Jesus. Instead, he seeks a Word from

Jesus. That is what faith always does. It does not turn in on itself, that is the way of despair. Faith goes to where God promises to be.

Feeling depressed? Read the Bible. Lonely? Read the Bible. Afraid? Worried? Uncertain? Struggling with temptation? Angry? Read the Bible! I went to college to learn this. It isn't that difficult, but still I haven't really learned it. None of us have. Well, John. But he had to have his head separated from his shoulders first. Now he knows it perfectly.

So how and where is the Bible read? In the middle of the night, it is read in your bed. In the middle of the day, it is read at your kitchen table or the couch. But that is not all. For faith goes where God promises to be, where the Bible itself directs us: to confession and absolution, to the Divine liturgy, to the Sacrament of His Body and Blood, to the community of saints and the common prayer.

Sometimes people say to me, **“But pastor, I didn't get anything out of Church. I wasn't fed.”** *Is that so?* Well, I've heard this before. I have a 10 year old girl with frostbitten ears who stands in front of a full refrigerator for hours at a time complaining that there is nothing to eat! Imagine thinking that only sugary snacks, empty calories full of chemicals can satisfy you while despising the glory of God's bounty in vitamin packed fruits and vegetables. I don't have to imagine it. I've done it. I bet you have, too. Well, you know what comes next, what always comes next, the preaching of John: Repent!

And listen to how Our Lord responds to John's query. He sends those disciples back to him to comfort that prophet with prophecy fulfilled. Tell him that the darkness is being dispelled by the Light, that creation is being brought back into order, that the fall is being reversed: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the lonely have company, the fearful courage, sinners are forgiven. That is to say, the poor are having Good News, the News of God's self-sacrifice to ransom men back to the Father, preached to them. **“You, too, John,”** says Our Lord, **“I will not forget you. I will not leave you in prison. I love even**

you. Father knows best. Soon, it will be complete. And I will relieve you of your burdens and give you rest. Your warfare, O greatest of my warriors, is also ended.”

There is John: strengthened by the Word of Christ in prison to face death and the life to come, a prophet of the highest, an example of living faith.

Here we are: forgiven, renewed, restored, in fellowship with John and all the saints before us and with us. Here we are: with the Spirit of Baptism in our hearts, a confession of thanks and joy upon our lips, commended to the Father by Grace, and about to receive the very Body and Blood of Christ into our dying flesh as the seal of the resurrection and life to come.

In + Jesus' Name. Amen.