

THE MESSIAH AND HIS MESSENGERS

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Old Testament Lesson; Isaiah 40:1-8

Epistle Lesson; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Sermon Text; Matthew 11:2-10

During the season of Advent, we transition from the Old Testament people, who hoped for the coming Messiah, to the New Testament, where Christ, the Savior is born. John the Baptist is the great prophet, who reached one hand into the Old Testament, pointing forward to the coming Christ, but also reached the other hand into the New Testament, because in his day, the Savior came. He is the great forerunner of Christ. He is the great transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament. John the Baptist was a faithful preacher who prepared the hearts of the people for the coming of the Savior. John the Baptist was faithful in his preaching of repentance of sin and then pointing to Jesus, as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Because he was faithful in preaching people to repent of their sin, he also preached to Herod Antipas, telling Herod to repent of his sin. Herod's great sin was that he had taken his own brother Phillip's wife, as his own wife. John the Baptist, being a faithful preacher, called Herod Antipas to repentance. Herod Antipas did not like that. And so, he threw John the Baptist into prison, at Herod's prison, in Macaraeus.

Now, John the Baptist has been in prison for about a year and Jesus'

ministry has begun. That picks us up with today's scripture reading. Listen to what happens, now that John the Baptist has been in prison for about a year, and he is about to be beheaded.

Matthew chapter 11, verses 2 – 10 says:

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask Him, “Are you the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the Good News is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what 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: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'”

These are Your Words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us in Your truth. Thy Word is truth.

Amen

Why did John the Baptist send his disciples with a question, to Jesus, “Are you the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” If you read scripture commentators, you will find that commentators come down on one side or the other, of the question, “Why did John the Baptist send his disciples to ask Jesus, 'Are you the One who was to come?'”

Some commentators (and these are the older Bible commentators)

say that John the Baptist had no doubts in his heart that Jesus was the coming Savior. Other Bible commentators (and these are more generally the newer ones) say that John the Baptist was beginning to doubt. They say that he had been in prison for a year and he was beginning to doubt whether Jesus really was the coming Messiah. And so, he sent his disciples to ask the question.

So, what was it? Did John have doubt in his heart, or didn't he have doubt in his heart? I want to talk to you about interpreting scripture. If you look at the passage, it simply says that John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

This passage does not say that John had doubt in his heart.

It does not reveal the motives of John's heart.

So, is it safe for us to assume that John did have doubt in his heart?

You know, Jesus, Himself, said,

"Judge not,
lest ye be judged."

Jesus wants us to be very careful that we do not judge the motives of people's hearts, if we are not sure whether they have sinned, or not.

To accuse someone of doubt, is to accuse them of sin. Jesus referred to John the Baptist, when He said, "There is no one greater born among women than John the Baptist." There is a commandment, the 8th Commandment that says,

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

What does this mean? **"We should fear and love God so that we do not lie about, betray, or slander our neighbor, but excuse him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything."**

And so, it would trouble my conscience for me to stand up here today, and accuse John the Baptist of doubt, when the scriptures do not accuse him of doubt. In fact, it is my duty, as a pastor, to stand up here and speak well of John the Baptist, to defend him, and to put

the best construction on everything. I do not believe that John the Baptist had any doubt in his heart that Jesus was the Savior, even though he had been in prison for a year. Consider John the Baptist.

-Already, before John was ever born, when he was in his mother's womb, and Mary walked into the room with Jesus in her womb, the Bible tells us that the infant in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy! Already, before he was born, John the Baptist testified that Jesus was the Savior of the world. He did not have any doubts as an infant that Jesus was the Savior.

-When Jesus came to the shores of the Jordan River, the banks of the Jordan River, to be baptized by John, John the Baptist looked at Jesus and said, "*You don't need to be baptized by me. I need to be baptized by you.*" He recognized, John recognized, "*I am the sinner and Jesus, you are the perfect one.*" He recognized Jesus, as the Messiah.

-When Jesus was baptized, John the Baptist heard the voice of the Father, from Heaven, say, "This is my beloved Son, with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him." John the Baptist saw the Holy Spirit land on Jesus, in the form of a dove. And, John testified to the crowd, "*This is the One. This is the Messiah.*" There was no doubt in his mind.

-When Jesus was standing on the banks of the Jordan River, one day, John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." There was no doubt in the mind and heart of John the Baptist, who Jesus was.

Jesus, in today's Scripture reading, testifies about John in a very solid way. He talks about John as a solid confessor of Christ. Jesus says, "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?" *No*. "If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?" *No*. "Then what 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: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who

will prepare your way before you.” Jesus proclaimed John as a faithful witness to the coming Christ.

So, when John was in prison, he told his disciples to go and ask Jesus, “Are you the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” We put the best construction on everything and we assume that John did not doubt that Jesus was the Savior. From prison, John couldn't preach, anymore. He could not preach, but he could send his disciples. His disciples could point to Jesus as the Messiah, by asking Jesus, Himself, the very question, “Are you the One?” *Are you the Messiah?* “Or, should we expect someone else?” So, Jesus could hold forth to the whole crowd, and point to Himself, as the Messiah. And so, they asked Jesus that question.

And how did Jesus respond? After a year into His ministry, there were many people in Jesus' day who were beginning to wonder if Jesus maybe was the Messiah. He, however, did not fit all of their conceptions of what the Messiah would be like. Jesus was poor, humble, lowly. Not what many of them expected in a Messiah. Jesus did not come from a family where He had deep religious training and upbringing like the teachers of the law and Pharisees. Jesus did not have some high level of education. He was brought up in a carpenter's home. Jesus did not gather around Him a great army. He had some humble disciples with Him. Jesus was not bringing about acts of judgment against the enemies, like many people thought the Messiah would do.

And so, they come and ask Jesus the question, “*Are you the Messiah, or should we look for someone else?*” What does Jesus point them to? Jesus points them to scripture. He points them to the miracles that He was performing and says, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the Good News is preached to the poor.” There Jesus is quoting from the book of Isaiah. I want you to consider the miracles that

Jesus pointed to.

Moses was a great prophet, in the Old Testament, who did great miracles. And, the people were waiting for someone like Moses, a prophet like him, who would perform great miracles like he did.

Moses even prophesied that a prophet like him would come.

Consider the miracles that Moses performed. Moses was the preacher of the law. He was the one through whom God presented the Ten Commandments. Those Ten Commandments show us our sin. Those Ten Commandments can trouble us.

Jesus came to preach Good News to the poor. He was the preacher of the Gospel. He was the preacher of comfort - your sins are forgiven.

Now, I want you to compare the miracles that Moses and Jesus performed. Moses performed miracles that terrified people and troubled people, just like the law terrifies and troubles us. Jesus performed miracles that comforted people and brought peace to people, just like the Gospel comforts us and brings us peace.

- Moses turned the water of the Nile into blood, troubling the people, but Jesus turned water into wine, to bring comfort to a couple in Canaan.

-Moses turned the light into darkness and it troubled the people. But, Jesus brought sight to the blind and comforted those who could not see.

-Moses called down hail from heaven in one of the great plagues. It was a great storm that brought destruction and trouble to people. Jesus calmed the storm and said, "Peace. Be still." He brought comfort and peace to the people.

-Moses brought down a plague that brought boils on the skin of the people and brought them great discomfort. But, Jesus healed those with leprosy and brought peace to them.

-Moses called down the great plague of the death of the first born and brought great distress and trouble, as many of the first born

in Egypt died. But Jesus was the first to rise from the dead and bring comfort and peace in the face of death.

So, Jesus points to all of His miracles, and says, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see.” Here is the Messiah who was to come. Here is the One who came to bring peace, and not just that outer peace. All of the troubles of this world point to a deeper trouble that we have and that is our sin.

Jesus came to comfort us in our sin.

Then Jesus, after pointing to those miracles as a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy regarding what the Messiah would be like, turned to the crowd and said, “Blessed are you, if you are not offended in me.” Then, He began to talk about John the Baptist. Now, John the Baptist was the first of what we call “The New Testament Preacher.” He was a preacher. He was in the preaching office. His job was to do what every preacher of the Gospel is to do. What Jesus says about John the Baptist refers to anyone who is in that preaching office, or the public ministry of the Word.

Jesus turned to the crowd and He said to the crowd, “*What did you go out into the wilderness to see? What do you expect in a preacher? What did you go out to see? Did you go out to see a reed shaken by the wind?*” Is that how a pastor or a preacher of the Word should be? Should a preacher of the Word be someone who is swayed by public opinion, who puts their finger in the air and says, “*What do the people want to hear?*” Scripture says, in the last times, people will gather to them teachers who tell them what their itching ears want to hear. That is not what we should go out to see, when we go to see those who are preachers of the Word. We should go out to see those who stand firm and say “*Thus saith the Lord*”, regardless of how people may react to it. That caused John to go to prison, and caused him to end up being beheaded for his faithful testimony to the Word of God. God requires of pastors and preachers of the Word, not that they say what the people want to

hear, but that they be faithful to the Word of God. What did you go out to see? A reed shaken by the wind, or swayed by the wind? Then, Jesus said, "If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?" Should a preacher be one who tries to attract people by the way he looks, by how cool he may be, or how clever he may be, or by how well he can turn a phrase? What did you go out to see? There is a preacher who said, "You ought to go visit a pastor's house and see where his carpet is most worn. If his carpet is most worn by his mirror, pray for that pastor. But, if his carpet is most worn under his desk where he studies the Word of God, so he can preach it to you faithfully, ask that pastor to pray for you." What did you go out to see? Did you go out to see someone dressed in fine clothes, or are you looking for a preacher of the Word, who is faithful? God requires the pastor be faithful to the Word. And then Jesus said, "Then what 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: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'" The job of any faithful preacher of the Word is to prepare your heart for the way of the Lord. How does the pastor, how did John or anybody, prepare you for the way of the Lord, for the coming of the Lord? Jesus said, in today's scripture reading, "the Good News is preached to the poor."

The Good News is preached to the poor.

The job of a pastor, or a preacher, or John the Baptist is not to point to all the poor people out in the world, and say, "*Look at the poor people out there. Let's go help them.*" Certainly, we want to do that, as God's people, but the job of a pastor is to show you **your poverty**, to show you how poor you are, to show how far you have fallen, and to show how corrupt you have become. Jesus came to preach the Good News to the poor.

Blessed are you when you are not offended.

When, like John the Baptist (who called people to repent), you hear

the Word of God, which shows you your need to repent of your sin, just as much as my need to repent of my sin. It shows us we are like that prodigal son, who has gone and wasted all he had on wild and riotous living, and now has nothing left to bring to God.

- We come with emptiness in our pockets.
- We come with nothing but sin to present to God.
- We are unworthy of all of His love.
- We are unworthy of all of His mercy.
- We are deserving of nothing but Hell, damnation, and death.

Blessed are you, when you are not offended, when you hear that. Until you realize your own poverty, you are not prepared for Jesus to say, *“I have come to preach Good News to the poor.”*

But, if you recognize, through the Word of God, “I am a poor, miserable sinner” and cry out in your heart, “God be merciful to me, a sinner”, then

- you are the one that our Lord Jesus wants to speak to.
- You are the one He wants to show His mercy to.
- You are the one He wants to save.

That is what His promises say. He is the God of the poor. Jesus says, “the Good News is preached to the poor.”

What is the Good News that He has come to preach? Well, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you, through His poverty, might become rich. That is the glorious message of the Gospel. That is what every preacher of the Gospel should preach - you are a poor sinner in need of forgiveness and then he should lay before you Christ. As John the Baptist pointed to Jesus on the banks of the Jordan and said,

**“Behold the Lamb of God
who takes away the sin of the world.”**

There is our joy!
There is our comfort!

There is our peace!

God humbled Himself, and took on human flesh. He walked the way of a lowly man. He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross. There, in the utter poverty of death, having taken all of your sins, Christ came to redeem you, to wash you clean, and to forgive you. That is the Good News that Christ came to preach to the poor.

Here we are, close to Christmas. We are about to celebrate the birth of our Savior. *We are rich for He was poor. Is not this a wonder? Therefore, praise God ever more, here on earth and yonder.* Let's live like poor people who have been made rich by the forgiveness of sins. And, let's spread that richness of the forgiveness of sins to those around us by our words and by our actions, for the sake of our Savior.

Amen