

GAUDETE / THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Text: St. Matthew 11:2-11

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

“Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?” Have you ever asked our LORD this question? Have you ever wondered, *“Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”* As we witnessed this morning in the Gospel reading appointed for Gaudete Sunday, Saint John the Baptist wondered.

You see, the JESUS who came to John that day on the Jordan, was not exactly the MESSIAH this seemingly eccentric man of the wilderness had expected. St. John had expected the CHRIST to come in wrath to execute vengeance upon those who were considered to be the enemies of God and Israel.

Yes, John the Baptist had expected the MESSIAH to execute the wrath of God. John expected the axe to be laid to the root of the trees and the chaff to be burned up with unquenchable fire. Yet, instead, his cousin, JESUS, came seeking out sinners, and shouldered in Himself all the vengeance and wrath of His heavenly FATHER against the sins of His enemies, including every one of us.

JESUS, in His first advent, came as the MESSIAH of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness, not as the MESSIAH of wrath and vengeance. He came to seek, to serve, and to save the lost. JESUS’ first advent was not for the purpose of executing judgment and punishment. It was to absorb the wrath of God for our sake. So, John wants assurance. He wonders and wants to know of JESUS, *“Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”*

You see, St. John had been locked away in the prison of King Herod. He was there for preaching the uncomfortable truth of Herod’s adultery. Then, just as now, sinners did not like to hear the truth of their sin, and Herod’s sin, among other things, was that he was living in adultery with his brother’s wife.

So, he, who came to make straight the paths of the LORD, was locked away in the depths of a dark, damp, prison cell for speaking the Truth. He who was to raise every valley was, himself, brought low. He who preached of the laying an axe to the root of trees, now waited on death row to feel the blade of an axe against his own neck—something he surely must have known. The voice crying out in the wilderness was about to be silenced. Yet, this was how it was to be, for John the Baptist must decrease and his cousin JESUS the MESSIAH increase.

Surely St. John knew this; indeed, it was he who prophesied it. John knew, also, what the prophets who had come before him had to say about the MESSIAH. He knew that the MESSIAH would come from the seed of Abraham, from the line of Jacob, a direct descendant of King

David. St. John knew that God's anointed One would come with a winnowing fan in His hand to separate the chaff from the wheat. He knew that the CHRIST was to *"thoroughly clean out His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn; but... burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

So, St. John the Baptist was a bit confused. He had seen the *"SPIRIT of God descending like a dove and alighting upon [JESUS]."* He had heard the voice of God from heaven proclaim, *"This is My beloved SON, in whom I am well pleased."* His cousin, JESUS, just had to be the MESSIAH. This had been John's faith since he leaped for joy in his mother Elizabeth's womb at JESUS' presence and the voice of JESUS' virgin Mother St. Mary. John had even pointed out to his disciples, *"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*

There could be no mistake, or could there be? When was JESUS going to get on with the work of threshing, and gathering, and burning? Was JESUS the One foretold? Was He the One for whom John spent his adult life preparing a way? Was JESUS the One for whom John was about to lose his head? Was He the coming One, or should John tell His disciples to look for another?

Here we see the humanity of John the Baptist. You see, St. John, for all his greatness, was troubled by the same plague that troubles all humankind. For all his greatness, John the Baptist was still a man, and as a man, he was subject to all the weaknesses of men; he was infected by the sin of the first Adam and his own sinful flesh. John's flesh was weak, and therefore he knew fear and doubt.

Still, John has faith. But how can that be? Does doubt not cancel faith?

To answer, I will use this illustration—What is courage? Is courage the lack of fear? No, it is not. Does courage cancel fear? No, it does not. As any soldier will tell you, only the insane enter battle without fear. Courage is not the absence of fear; courage is the ability to handle oneself well even in the face of fear. Courage is doing what must be done despite how loudly one's fear speaks against it. Courage is not the lack of fear, courage is the ability to overcome one's fear.

So, it is, with faith. Faith does not mean that in our weakness we do not sometimes doubt. Faith is clinging to a belief when everything else speaks against that belief, and saving faith believes and clings to God's Word alone despite being plagued by fear and doubt, despite the circumstances one finds oneself in, or what worldly reason may dictate. Saving faith fears, loves, and trusts in God above all things, in all circumstances, and at all times.

True faith is the faith that trusts in God when your world comes crashing down around you. This is the faith that grasps hold of God's promises in His SON when your family is falling apart and your spouse decides to desert you. This faith refuses to lose hope when you have lost your job or there are more days at the end month than there are dollars in the paycheck to cover them. This is the faith that holds securely to the promises of God when the doctor tells you that there is nothing more he can do for you or your loved one. This is the faith that clings to God

when you hear the words, surgery, cancer, Alzheimer's, dementia, Parkinson's Disease, Lou Gehrig's Disease, heart disease, famine, pandemic, war, and yes, even death. This faith refuses to curse God and die. And this is the faith of St. John, the Baptist, for even when doubt caused him to question what he knew and believed to be true, he knew to whom he should turn. He knew that only JESUS has the Words of eternal life.

Therein lays the greatness of John the Baptist. In faith, he looked to JESUS. JESUS did not condemn him for his doubt, nor does He disappoint him. JESUS gives to John an answer tailor-made for the last and greatest of the prophets:

“Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the Gospel preached to them.”

It was as though JESUS answered him and said, *“Cousin John, check the prophetic records and measure Me against them. All the prophets are being fulfilled in Me. All prophecies are coming to pass, even your own. I have come to accomplish what the FATHER has set out for Me to do. Trust in the signs John, not the doubts of your heart, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand... ‘And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me’”*

With His answer, our LORD JESUS gave to John even more than he had asked for. John received the Word of God, and in receiving this, he received absolution, grace, and comfort. John was facing death, but in and with our LORD's Words, he received life.

Therefore, St. John was not offended by JESUS and His Cross. He was not offended that he must decrease while our LORD increased. He was not offended that even though he was the greatest born of women, he still had to submit to the will of God. Instead, he sought to hear once more the promises and Word of God. He desired to hear God's Word, for in it he knew he would find the Words of eternal life and the very Words of salvation.

This life and salvation is what John the Baptist so greatly hungered for in his hour of despair and greatest need, and this is what JESUS gave him, and this is what He comes to give you today. He comes to take your doubt and fear and give you faith and hope in their place. These, He gives to you in the same way He gave them to John—through His Word.

Through hearing His Gospel, read, preached, and sung in the Divine Liturgy, JESUS makes your blind eyes to see and your deaf ears to hear, overcoming your doubts. With His Word, JESUS cleanses you from the leprosy of sin and gives your lame legs the strength to stand beneath the weight of your cross. With the Word of His Gospel He raises you from eternal death to everlasting life.

JESUS does this by the power of His own death and resurrection and its benefits delivered to you through His Means of Grace—His Word and Sacraments. That is what John sought from prison and that is what JESUS gave to him. You see, that is how JESUS creates faith—by the Word which proceeds from His mouth.

In this very same way, JESUS delivers to you what He gave to John, for by the Word of His mouth JESUS joins Himself to simple water, making Baptism a washing of regeneration, and to simple wine and simple bread, adding to them His Body and Blood given and shed for you. This is how our LORD JESUS comes to strengthen and renew, to comfort and console you. This is how our LORD comes to encourage you and forgive your sin.

Blessed are those who do not demand more, who are not disappointed or offended by these simple means. For JESUS gives you the best of Himself. In fact, He gives you Himself totally, even His own life, fully and completely. So, come, blind and lame no more! Come and receive the consolation of the sorrowful and the strength of the weak. Come and receive the Babe of Bethlehem who suffered and died upon a cross for you. Leave your doubts and fears behind, for you have nothing left to fear and there is no one left to accuse you. JESUS has forgiven your sins.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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