

Sermon – Matthew 11: 2-11 (Advent 3)

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How is your Advent going? Have you made the most of Advent? Have you taken to heart the message of Advent, that is, to repent, and to trust in Christ? This morning we will hear these two messages from Jesus, and from his forerunner, John the Baptist. But what impact can we expect from that message? Dear friends, we can expect great things from this message of Advent, because it is the powerful message of God's Word. Therefore, **have great expectations this Advent!** Have great expectations this Advent first, **as you listen to Jesus**, and second, **as you listen to John**.

Our text begins by telling us what happened to John after last Sunday's Gospel. Remember how John was in the wilderness, calling people to repentance, preparing the way for the Lord? Well, John brought that message of repentance to Herod. John told Herod that he was living in sin, because Herod had taken his brother's wife. So Herod got mad and put John in prison.

Sitting in prison, John longed to hear about Christ. But when John heard about what Jesus was saying and doing, it wasn't matching up with what John expected. John expected Christ to cast all the unbelievers into unquenchable fire. This bothered John, to the point that he even doubted if Jesus was the Messiah. Our text says that John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, **"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"** Note well what John did when he had doubts. He didn't sit and wallow in his doubts. He went straight to Christ.

And then note well Jesus' loving response to John. He didn't yell at John. Instead, **"Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see.'"** What did John's disciples see? Jesus goes on, **"The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised."** Does that sound familiar? In our first lesson, we heard Isaiah say that the Messiah would do these very things. This was an unmistakable sign to John that Jesus truly is the Messiah. On the basis of God's Word, John could be confident that Jesus was his long-expected Savior.

Then Jesus adds yet another proof. He says, **"and the good news is preached to the poor."** With that, the Savior addresses the very issue that was bothering John so much. Remember – John was expecting a fire and brimstone Christ, who would destroy those who didn't repent. Moreover, one of those who didn't repent, Herod, put John in prison! It just didn't seem right to John! Ah, but Jesus was the Savior whose job it was at this time to preach good news to the poor, as Isaiah also foretold. It's as if Jesus' answer to John is: "John, put all your trust in me! Believe on the basis of the God's Word! Look at what I'm doing! I'm fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah! Dear John, don't fall away on account of me! Rather, let this prophecy of Isaiah about me convince you that I am your Savior!" Can you imagine how happy John must have been to get this report back from Jesus?

Dear friends, don't look down on John for doubting. John, you see, was a person just like any of us. He too was a sinner. Think of the severe stress John must have been under, as he sat there in prison! There he was suffering so, while everyone else seemed to have it so good. And what made less sense, Jesus wasn't doing anything about it! The same thing can happen to us. This is such a stressful time of year. It's a time when our problems are amplified. For instance, if we're lonely the rest of the year, we're even more lonely at Christmas. Moreover, we tend to have such high expectations for Christmas. We all have this idea in our minds of the perfect Christmas – and when reality doesn't meet expectation, it can be downright depressing. Then, just like John, we sit in the prison of our sadness and loneliness, and we wonder, where is Jesus in all this? Why does it seem like the unbelievers have it so good, while God's people have it so bad? What is more, Satan plagues us in our sadness. He may even twist our Advent

preparations for Christmas. He may plague our consciences saying, “You haven't prepared enough! You haven't repented enough!” Or he may take it from another angle, so that as we gaze into the manger this Christmas, Satan says, “Yes, there is the Christ Child, but your sins are too great, you've sinned too much. That Child wasn't born for you.” With that, Satan not only ruins our Christmas, but he tries to get us to fall away entirely on account of Christ.

Dear friends, when you have doubts about God's love for you, do what John did. Go straight to Christ! And what will He say to you – to you who are poor in spirit, who have nothing to offer God but sin, fears, doubts, and tears? He will say, “Come, look into the manger. What do you *see* and *hear*? You *hear* the angel say, ‘Behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which is for all people.’” Are you not one of all people? Therefore this good news is preached to you too – that to you a Savior is born! What do you *see*, when you look into the manger? You see God's love, because you see God Himself taking on your human flesh. You see God's Son, who has come into this world not to condemn and curse you, but to bless you, to forgive your sins, and to give you heaven. This is the Gospel preached to the poor. This is the Gospel preached to you! Jesus says to you, “Oh, do not fall away on account of me! Rather, blessed are you, because you listen to me! I once was placed in the poor manger, so that you might become eternally rich. I met every expectation God makes of you in the Law. And I did that in your place. I even died for all your sins!” Oh yes, you can have great expectations this Advent season, because through the Gospel, Jesus works confidence in your heart. You can be confident that Jesus is your Savior from sin.

To return to our text, the two disciples of John left to go and tell John the same good news. Now Jesus turns his attention to the crowd of people who heard this conversation. These people knew John very well. Remember - Jews came from all over to listen to John! If they didn't hear John themselves, they certainly heard about what John said. So Jesus now addresses them about John. He says, “**What did you go out into the desert to see?**” That's a searching question, isn't it? Jesus Himself gives a few possible answers. “[**Did you go out to see**] a reed swayed by the wind.” In other words, Jesus asks, “Did you go out to see someone who's wishy-washy, whose message changes constantly?” The people would have had to admit, “That's certainly not true of John. His message was always, ‘**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!**’” So Jesus poses another possibility. “[**Did you go out to see**] a man dressed in fine clothes?” Again, the crowd would have to say, “No, that certainly doesn't describe John either. He wore clothes of camel's hair.” Jesus says too, “**No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.**” John was far from royalty! In fact, he was so consistent about his message of repentance, that he even told Herod to repent – and he ended up in prison for it!

So Jesus asks again, “**Then what did you go out to see? A prophet?**” That's the nub of the issue. You see, some of these people now listening to Jesus indeed went out to *see* John. They maybe went out to *see* this odd man wearing camel's hair and eating locusts! But some of them did not go out to *hear* John. They did not take John's message to heart. They did not repent of their sins. That's why Jesus says a few verses after our text, “**He who has ears to hear let him hear.**” It's as if Jesus is saying, “You indeed went out to *see* the prophet. Oh, please now *listen* to John! He's more than a prophet! ‘**This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way before you.’** Yes, John was no ordinary prophet. He was a prophet whom other prophets foretold hundreds of years ago! He's the prophet who immediately precedes the Messiah! His whole job was to prepare you for me!”

Then Christ continues to praise John with a solemn oath saying, “**I tell you the truth, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.**” In other words, Jesus says to you today, “You can depend on this no matter what: By God's grace, John was indeed the greatest man who ever lived! He's the one

who prepared the way for me! But this is something else you can depend on, no matter what! You who listened to John; you who repent of your sin; you who have been made members of the kingdom of God through baptism; you who have been forgiven of your sins; you who hate your sins and wish to serve God – **YOU ARE GREATER THAN JOHN!**” John once called himself the groomsman of Christ, the bridegroom. But St. Paul calls you the bride of Christ. Who's greater – the bride or the groomsman? The bride, of course! As the bride of Christ, Christ has put on you the wedding garment of his righteousness through baptism. He has nourished your souls with His true body and blood in the Lord's Supper. Yes, John, the bridegroom of Christ, pointed to Jesus and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” But, but by God's grace, you, the bride, know how it happened! You know that Christ died on the cross to take away all your sins! You know that Christ rose from the dead to give you absolute proof that you are forgiven! You, like John, know by God's grace that you have heaven!

And so, dear friends, did you listen to John? If not, oh, then, please listen to him! Repent of your sins! Look to Christ! Then, all of you, this Christmas, look into the manger, and see your Savior laying there for you! See all the expectations of all the ages lying in the manger of Bethlehem! With the virgin Mother, ponder in your hearts this truth, that Jesus is your Savior! With John, leave the ways of the world behind. That doesn't mean you have to go to the desert and wear camels' hair and eat locusts! What that does mean is that you can expect great things from God this Advent! Christ has freed you from the sins that used to enslave you! With God's help, you can change your lives and live for God! By grace, you have great expectations for when Jesus comes again, because Christ Himself will take you to heaven! Amen.