

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 11:2-11

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalms 146:5-10

James 5:7-10

December 15, 2019

The Third Sunday of Advent

I was trying to think of a word or an image that describes what is happening in our Gospel reading this morning. It's Advent, after all, and it seems that what we hear most during this season are words like peace, love, anticipation, and hope. Good tidings of great joy. Pastoral perfection complete with the full cast of characters at the manger.

But the words that come to my mind today are despair, doubt, hurt and fear. There is nothing pastoral about the scene in our text from Matthew. It's simply a dirty, cold prison cell. Stark and empty, except for John.

He had worked so hard. He had believed in his calling. He had followed. And now, he is a prisoner wondering if any of it mattered. Did any of his work make a difference? It seems like a depressing image, a hopeless situation that might make us conclude that, no, it didn't matter. It was just a lot of hard work wasted.

However, the more I thought about the right word to convey this passage, the more I realized it isn't despair, doubt, hurt or fear. It is bravery.

I think John was brave but not in the way you might think. Not for his resiliency in the midst of a very dire situation. (Although I am sure it took more bravery than I can imagine.) I think he was brave for his vulnerability. John asks a question in his lowest moment that many of us are afraid to ask. He asks of Jesus "are you the one who is to come?" Are you really the one who we have all been waiting for?

This question, coming from John, seems silly at first. After all, John has given his life to a singular mission of preparing the way for Jesus. And now, everything he believed in, everything he gave himself for has been broken into pieces and his mission has come to an awful end. He will soon lose his life.

Jesus...are you the one I did this for? Did it matter? Does anyone care? Do you even care?

It's a moment of vulnerable doubt and despair and above all, a moment of honesty. And that took guts. John's world is broken in two and it's no wonder he sits there second guessing this Messiah. His prison cell is surely closing in on him and I doubt we would be any different given the circumstances.

And yet, we are often taught that doubt or questioning is a sign of weakness, or of a small faith so we keep our questions to ourselves not wanting to look like we don't have it all together. Not wanting to seem like we aren't quite sure if we can trust this God because life has thrown

us an unbearable curveball. But, the theologian Matthew Henry once stated that where there is true faith, yet there may be a mixture of unbelief.

Maybe it takes a prison cell to help us acknowledge our doubt, to be vulnerable enough to say I don't know. It's easy to have a visible, vocal faith when things are going our way. We can say...look what God has done for me! Isn't prayer incredible? God is so good. We like to shout about Jesus when we are up on the mountain top. But when we are in our own prisons, our own valleys, our shouts can fade to faint cries. Our praise leaves us and we want to keep asking....why? Is this the Messiah who was supposed to help me, we whisper. We don't want to let anyone in our secret...believing and hoping can be really hard at times.

That's why I want to say that John is brave. He is brave because he dares to ask the question...out loud. And he wants Jesus to hear it. He speaks the unspeakable directly from his heart.

It's interesting to have this story in the middle of Advent. In some ways it feels like we have gone one step forward and two steps back. We have moved from anticipation and hope and promise to this place of uncertainty.

And maybe that is the lesson...the lesson that life sends us forth with no guarantee of a straight path. Our faith doesn't assure us that we will always be on the mountain top, strong, and secure in who we are and what we are doing. We aren't promised a perfect faith.

Yet, we are promised a perfect God. A God who will love us when we are on the mountain and a God who will love us when we are in the deepest valley.

What is so beautiful about this passage is that Jesus never condemns John for his doubt. Instead, he confirms his bravery. Jesus tells his disciples to go back to John and share with him what they have seen. That his work has brought about incredible moments of grace and mercy. The blind see. The lame walk. The deaf hear. The poor have been given good news.

And then Jesus turns to the crowd and says, "No one has arisen greater than John the Baptist."

John the Baptist...the one who we find in prison this week...doubting, questioning, asking. I hope he was able to hear the message that Jesus sent to him. I hope he was able to find peace. I hope he was able to allow his vulnerability to provide him with renewed faith, a stronger faith, a brave faith.

Last night a group of us went caroling. We sang in places that felt like those two steps back, the figurative prisons of our lives. One woman had lost her spouse a couple of months ago and was facing her first Christmas alone. Another was homebound and struggled to take care of her daily needs. Another was fighting brain cancer and couldn't get out of bed.

But when we sang, they sang, too. They allowed us to see their vulnerability and their pain. They opened themselves up to moments of joy in the midst of the doubt and fear they were all surely feeling. But they sang.

The most profound moment was when we were with Bill Bolton. He is in a rehab facility trying to regain strength after multiple health issues. We crowded around his bed. I got down on my knees and held his hand and we all sang with joy. He closed his eyes and quietly sang the words that had become ingrained in his mind over the years. Then, we took communion together. This room full of youth and adults together knowing that even in times of uncertainty, we can find moments of love and peace and grace.

Tears streamed down Bill's face. He was overwhelmed that folks would come to see him. And then, he prayed for us and we prayed for him.

Are you the one who is to come? And Jesus was there.

I told the youth when we left his room that this is what love is all about. When we meet one another in our vulnerability, when we share our prisons, when we allow ourselves to call out and ask the hard questions, Jesus indeed meets us there. Little moments of grace change lives and remind us that our faith may waiver but God never does.

Thanks be to God. Amen.