

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 12/11/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Third Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, December 11th

Matthew 11:2-11

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Go to the Scriptures and Rejoice!

The Third Sunday in Advent is associated with joy and the lighting of a pink candle. Also known as Gaudete Sunday (Latin for "rejoice"), the tradition dates from the Middle Ages when the reading for this day was Philippians 4:4-6: ⁴ *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.* ⁵ *Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;* ⁶ *do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* During this overall penitential mood of the season, the Third Sunday of Advent allows us a glimpse of the joy to come. This is an interesting backdrop to Matthew's Gospel lection. We find John the Baptist, the one who has dedicated his entire life (even while still in the womb) pointing the way to the coming Messiah, experiencing doubt and confusion about who Jesus is. Jesus is not fitting into John's messianic expectations. So, John sends messengers to Jesus to seek confirmation and assurance. How did Jesus answer this confusion? By directing John to the Scriptures.

Matthew 11:2-11 Commentary

The lectionary text falls within larger text block addressing messengers sent from John the Baptist to Jesus (11:1-19). John the Baptist had been imprisoned earlier by Herod Antipas (4:12) but no further details are given until 14:1-12.

² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Presumably John's disciples kept him informed about the unfolding of Jesus' ministry while he was in prison. John had recognized Jesus as his superior in 3:14-15. Matthew's use of "*the Christ*" is the Greek form (*Christos*) of the Jewish word "*Messiah*" meaning the anointed one. Matthew is in no doubt about who Jesus is, even if John is seeking assurance. John the Baptist appears to be hesitant. Why? Perhaps what he had heard about Jesus did not fit with what he expected. Perhaps his own situation of being imprisoned similarly did not fit with his worldview of what to expect when the Messiah came. As the text of the Gospel lection from the Second Sunday of Advent showed, John was expecting someone who would administer a two-fold baptism with both Spirit and fire; someone who would come with a winnowing fork to separate and judge (3:11-12). To John, Jesus was fire and brimstone, yet the Sermon on the Mount showed Jesus to be quite different (Chapters 5-7) and there was no evidence people were being judged. Adding to this, John was probably quite surprised to find himself in prison.

⁴ And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Jesus responds by comparing his deeds to those prophesized in various verses from Isaiah that John would have been familiar with. Jesus' solution to doubt and confusion was to direct John to the Holy Scriptures. We are also provided with some insight into John's doubt: John is clearly not offended by Jesus (like the Jewish leaders), John does not yet understand the full story. Jesus could have rebuked John for expressing such doubt, yet He chose to bless him (and all others who do not take offense) instead. As we know from our vantage point of having access to the complete revelation, the judgment prophesized by John will not take place until Jesus' Second Coming.

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."

As John's messengers leave, Jesus now vindicates John to the crowd. He does so through a series of three questions and answers that progressively lead to a greater understanding of John. *A reed shaken by the wind* - a reed on the banks of the River Jordan shaken by the wind was a common term for a person who was pliable.¹ The assumption here is that John was certainly not a person who was weak or pliable or not willing to stand his ground. Nor was John wearing the soft clothing of a courtier. He was not skilled in the art of flattery or politics. He told it like it is. Ironically, John was in the house of the king - only in a prison cell.² There is perhaps some deliberate irony here contrasting John with Herod. The nature of John's clothing points to his true role. John was a prophet.

John was not just a prophet but the "super-prophet." In addition to being a prophet, he is also a fulfillment of prophecy. John is preparing the way for Jesus as written some four hundred years earlier in Malachi 3:1. The one who prepared the way was identified as Elijah (Malachi 4:5-6). John is alluded to Elijah in Matthew 11:14.³

¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Jesus indicates that John is the forerunner of the Messiah. John is standing at the border of the new age and announces the coming of the Kingdom. By these criteria, John is the greatest human ever to have lived. Yet Jesus is very clear that what matters is membership of the Kingdom which has nothing to do with merit.

Reflection

There are many ways in which this passage may connect to our lives during this season of Advent. For some, there are those, like John, who, after lives of faithful service to Christ, may find themselves disappointedly imprisoned by their failing bodies ravaged by the effects of time. Like John, they may be questioning is this the way things ought to be. Then there are those who are convinced they and their brand of Christianity have figured out the real Jesus only to realize Jesus refuses to be constrained by our doctrines and human ideas of church. There are also

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: The New Daily Study Bible*, rev. ed., vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 5-6.

² R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 197.

³ D. Turner and D. L. Bock, (2005). *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, vol. 11 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 161.

those who are confused by how the Herods of our world appear to be triumphing while the church is in decline. Our post-Christian society has, for all intents and purposes, finished with Jesus. However, Jesus has not finished with the world! While we are preparing to celebrate Christmas and the birth of our Savior as a past event, we know there is much more to this story that is still yet to come. Therefore, we rejoice! No matter where we might find ourselves in our life journey and in our walk as disciples, when things become unclear, we must do what Jesus had John do - go to the Scriptures. Whereas John had to send his messengers to Christ on his behalf, we have access to the Spirit of Christ within us to provide such illumination.

To many, the imprisoned John the Baptist is a suitable metaphor for many churches today. Having prepared the way for Jesus, Jesus was not what John expected. Having been tasked to prepare the world for Christ's return, Christians are now confined inside the walls of their churches, experiencing rapid decline and closures. Many Christians are confused why the church is in such a decline. How does Jesus reply to John in the text? He points John to compare what he sees happening to what is said in the Scriptures. Jesus trusts that John, by doing so, will understand.

Application

- What thoughts, feelings, images, or ideas did you experience while reading this text?
- How does it make you feel that John the Baptist, the "super-prophet" had doubts about Christ being the one?
- How might your expectations of Jesus be distorted by the culture?
- Are you seeing God's presence in the world today or looking for the Christ of the culture.
- How might your expectations of church be constraining how the church works in the world?
- Where do you see joy in the text this week?
- Where have you experienced joy this week?
- Where are you being called to act?



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