

Isaiah 35:1-10

Matthew 11:2-11

James 5:7-10

“The Lord watches over the strangers;
upholds the orphan and the widow, but
the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.”

AMEN!

Two weeks ago we visited “Hope” in
the first week of Advent.

That week was connected to the text in
Matthew which informed us of
the sudden coming of the Son of Humanity...

how the God will be coming will be like a thief.

Then, last week we had the theme of “Peace”
and discovered the reality of destruction,
violence, and enslavement surrounded
those texts and how the Bible told us

that those horrible things came under
the allowance of God.

Today, with the theme of “Joy”
around our Advent texts, you and I might
be a little skeptical, right? :-)

I mean fool me once... shame on you...

but fool twice?

What does fool us thrice mean! :-)

Tradition has it that the third week of
Advent is Gaudete (Go-Deh-teh) Sunday.

Distinctive and marked by the
pink candle lit on the Advent wreath.

In the reflective and preparatory
nature of Advent today,
we are given: Joy.

The scene in Matthew's gospel is not very joy-full.

At least for John the Baptist who was incarcerated.

Imprisoned for pissing off the wrong people,
you could say.

The prophet, the zealot, was
fiery in his preaching...
and went too far.

That's what zealots do!

They don't really lead people to know
the love God has for them.

They're more comfortable scaring people
into God's arms.

So, John angered the religious leaders and
we know he angered the political leaders, but
isn't it interesting that he probably angered
his own followers, too.

With his sureness that the Messiah to come
would bring military might and military
liberation from Roman occupation and with
his truth about religious puppets.

Zealots, of every age, never proclaim
a God that is a mystery to humankind,
but speak of a vengeful God.

So, now John is in jail and
his future was not joy-full.

His zeal now was dissolved and he wondered,
like we all would have wondered, was
it all worth it?

He'd pointed out Jesus;
named him the Lamb of God,
but didn't know the kind of message
Jesus brought;

and still not one sword picked up.

Not a single army formed.

No messianic army coming to rescue him.

He'd laid it all on the line and now,
in a cold, dark cell, he wondered... for what?

Maybe you've had similar feelings after
trying to do something good or something
you feel important to your faith.

Only to later have doubts and wonder if
Jesus really is the One. (Pause)

I can only imagine what it feels like
to wait behind bars in prison.

And, I really want to find fault in John the Baptizer
for his doubting of Jesus being the One.

Even, allow prison to punish him.

But, whom among us in times of trial and
suffering haven't had the same doubt?

It is precisely in these time that we question God!

How long must we wait for you, Lord?
Aren't things bad enough?

Where are you amidst the suffering of
your children and the suffering
around the world? (Pause)

So, I'm rather grateful that we have
this text from Matthew about John's
incarceration and his struggle with faith
on this Advent journey.

For, through him, we get the answer we need.

When we question if Jesus is
really coming into our lives... into our world.

We, like John want the "yes" or "no" answer,
but Jesus will not give it.

John, in his zeal, assumed things about God
that Jesus disputed but Jesus remained in
John's life and witness.

Instead of replying, "Yes, John, you are right.
I am the One."

He asked "What are you seeing?"

What are you hearing?

What are you perceiving to be God's
activity in the world? (Pause)

We've been getting it all wrong, too.

Christianity has become more
like John the Baptizer-ology.

When people say, "You must be baptized" or
"You require a conversion experience
to claim salvation," and we listen to them

then we follow zealots.

And nothing in us is really changed,
we have to go through it to get to real
transformation.

Anyone can say, "Jesus is the One,"
but it's not enough.

Even Jesus didn't say "He is the One," because
he knew it is not enough.

Jesus asked, "What do you see
God at work doing?" (Pause)

It's a powerful question for us, too.

How are you seeing God show up?

But there's danger around the question.

The danger is that we will look in the wrong places
or listen to the wrong voices because
they're out there.

I know, you know!

They say look for God in places of power and privilege.

They teach that God wants you to be rich and
look a certain way, wear fancy stuff,
and say the right words.

They want "greatness" to mean invulnerable and
they want power to mean that you
must always win.

And we move further and further from Jesus.

We can be joyful in that Jesus calls us back;
never gives up.

Jesus says to look for God in places

where sight is given to the blind,
mobility is given to the infirm and broken,

hearing to the the deaf, and new life to the dead.

And the hardest of all these is the last one:
the poor have good news brought to them.

Most of us would think the hardest is
new life to the dead.

But, when we wonder if a person is anointed,
which is what messiah means,
“the anointed one,”

Then watch to see if they are bringing
good news to the poor.

Whenever and wherever the powerless are
given justice and power...
there you will see God. (Pause)

Looking in the wrong places and listening
to the wrong voices is dangerous but
the greatest danger is ceasing to look
with fresh eyes at what Jesus did
or listening with renewed ears
to what Jesus taught.

If we don't spend time in studying
what Jesus said and did
then we begin to make the coming One
into something God is not.

AMEN!