

Sermon Advent III A 2016

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Psalms 146:4-9

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From last week's gospel lesson to this morning's lesson, time seems to be moving very rapidly. Perhaps you feel that time is moving too rapidly as well. In this Advent season, we frequently feel that time is not on our side. The same is true in the gospel, time has really flown by. Almost like we binge watched the life of John the Baptist. We didn't just cut out the commercials we cut out the program content as well. We have gone from John preaching a baptism of repentance to John in prison.

John was imprisoned by the evil ruler Herod Antipas. He was imprisoned first because of his popularity, which was perceived to be a threat by Roman authorities. John's message of repentance wasn't their concern, rather what concerned them was John's ability to mobilize great numbers of people from all walks of life. Their fear of such power led to John's arrest. But Herod's wife Herodias also wanted John imprisoned. She wanted revenge against John for his moral outrage at Herod's behavior, taking Herodias in marriage since she had been married previously to his brother.

John's ministry has been brought to an end by political forces and as he sits in prison he wonders about the messiah. He and the Hebrew world had been looking forward to the messiah for generations.

Generations of expectation can create quite a hope. And that was the case with the people of Israel. They hoped for a messiah who would bring freedom, would vindicate the people of God. Who would establish right relationships in society. The messiah would come with a different kind of power. This power would not be for healing but for restoration. A power that

would restore the people of Israel to prominence. This envisioned messiah was the one that John had predicted. A messiah that comes with a winnowing fork to separate the righteous from unrighteous. A messiah who would violently overthrow the Roman occupation and restore the prominence of the twelve tribes of Israel.

John is in prison. His situation is desperate. What has become of the one whom he had welcomed? When would the revolution begin? He wonders about his life, his worth, and his faith. He has heard stories of Jesus. He wonders; is Jesus the messiah? Is Jesus the one that Israel has so longed for? It doesn't seem to be the case for John. As was once said, "If this is how you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them."

Like John there are times when we too find ourselves imprisoned. Prison can take many forms. Our job can feel like a prison, if we are working in a job that is not rewarding without future potential for advancement. Sometimes the prison seems to be the family system that we have grown up in. Dysfunction seems to be the rule of thumb and we see no way out. Sometimes our prison is of our own creation, resulting from poor choices that we have made. At other times we may find ourselves imprisoned by our own genetic makeup and we succumb to addiction, depression, anxiety. In such prisons the way out seems beyond our control. Sometimes those prisons take the form of illness where despite the best care we find ourselves losing the battle and not receiving the healing we desire. Eventually we all may face such an illness. We have tried to live faithful lives, and yet we face unimaginable situations. We have prayed. We have bargained. We have cajoled and yet salvation or hope of a cure remains an impossibility. And at such times we too ask Jesus, "Are you the one?" Have I placed my hope and trust in the right basket. Are you the one? "Or should I look for another?" Yes, we know about the miracles that Jesus performed but perhaps no miracle has been forthcoming for us. Yet, healing can take many forms.

So John sent his disciples to enquire of Jesus. To John's question, Jesus doesn't give the most direct of answers. Jesus does not say, "Yes, I am the Messiah." Instead Jesus responds by citing the example of his ministry. Go and tell John what they have seen. "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Jesus was not the messiah that John or generations of faithful Hebrews had hoped for but he was the messiah that Isaiah and other prophets had predicted.

Our reading from Isaiah described the hope of generations. A messiah would come who would "strengthen weak hands and make firm feeble knees." A messiah who would open the eyes of the blind, unstop the ears of the deaf, and allow the lame to walk, and release the tongues of the speechless. Early in Jewish history and scripture, the prophet Isaiah had foreseen a messiah who would come with healing power.

The prophet Isaiah writing in the midst of exile writes of hope. What had previously been barren, a dessert would spring forth into life again. And that is what we are promised. Having lived this life in faith and fear, no matter what prisons we may find ourselves in, at the end we too shall "see the glory of the Lord," Isaiah promised.

Healing ministry was not what the people of Israel had expected of the Messiah. In fact, what Jesus was doing was destabilizing the cultural understanding of illness and suffering. You see illness was understood to be a punishment from God for sins committed. If you were born blind either you had sinned or your parents had sinned to produce this. Jesus worked hard to overcome this cultural understanding. Despite Jesus' teaching on this point we today still have a tendency to try to explain illness as a result of someone's lifestyle or actions. A punishment for some sin perhaps. The truth is that illness happens and many times there is no known explanation, at least not yet.

After the disciples of John left, Jesus went on to sing the praises of John to his disciples and those gathered around him. But despite the praise, John will not leave prison alive. Many of us are imprisoned by things that we cannot escape either. Ultimately, Jesus would be imprisoned and would not be able to escape either. Faith does not remove us from the difficult places of life, despite our hopes. We too might look for release and not discover it. But through Christ's crucifixion, death, and resurrection, Jesus overcame death once and for all. And that is the source of our hope. That is one of the major themes of Advent. This season of waiting and hope.

An Advent story. Sometimes when we think of nursing homes we tend to think of them as prisons as places that we hope not to go to. But let me share a story of a woman in a nursing home. Her name was Betty Hurt. She was a woman in my parish who had emphysema and progressive respiratory failure. She required oxygen and nursing care around the clock which meant that as her life was ebbing away, she had to leave her home and a nursing home was her only option. Betty had a personality that tended to push people away rather than draw them close. This included her family. She had only a daughter and she had pushed her away as well. As her health declined she had estranged herself from her friends and her daughter. And as she spent the remaining days of her life in the NH she too wondered about Jesus. She had tried to be faithful. She had been regular in worship and prayer. Yet, healing was not possible so she had resigned herself to the fact that the nursing home was the only place where she could receive care for her complicated medical conditions. Yet, her illness took its toll on her both physically and emotionally.

Her condition gradually worsened. She had instructed the nurses not to call her daughter under any circumstances. But as her condition deteriorated and she approached death, one evening her nurse had the wisdom to call her daughter. And her daughter responded immediately. Her daughter came and sat with Betty the night she died. Betty held her daughter's hand the whole

evening. Few words were exchanged but she knew her daughter was there. Sometimes our healing occurs right at the point of death.

Through all the events and yes even the prisons of our lives, God in Jesus is there, with us. None of us get out of this life alive. Many of us have benefited from reading Atul Gawande's book, *Being Mortal*. While not overtly written from a faith perspective, there is much for us to learn. Gawande's book examines how we care for one another as life is drawing to a close. Too often we view death as a battle lost. But that view is dangerous because in the end life does come to an end. If we are not careful we may spend our last days grasping for the impossible and miss the opportunities available to us. Gawande suggests that there are important questions to explore as life is drawing to a close. Questions like, "What has meaning for us as our days shorten?" This is the critical question to ask. In the midst of all we do to prolong life, we need to be sure that we know what elements of life bear the most meaning for someone. We mustn't assume. We must ask. We must ask questions that don't come easily. Questions that aren't answered easily either. But Gawande's stories show us that death can be a time of grace and even healing.

Jesus is the Messiah of God, Emmanuel, God with us. In this season of Advent, this season of hope and expectation, may you too come to know the abiding presence of Jesus who journeys with us always.