

Advent 3-December 11, 2022

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

James 5:7-10 and Matthew 11:2-11

“Suffering, Patience, and Freedom”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize you with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” **And I have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”**

John also testified, **“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”**

“This is the Son of God.” “Are you the one?” You might think that such contrasting statements would have to be spoken by different people. But they were not. John the Baptist who baptized Jesus in the Jordan River and watched the Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove, just as he was told would happen had no doubt that the one who he baptized was none other than the Son of God. John the Baptist was confident when he told the crowds of people that came out to him in the wilderness and pointed everyone away from himself and toward Jesus because he would bring sight to the blind, he would give hearing to the deaf, he would make the lame to walk, he would set the captives free, and he would bring good news to the poor. Yes, it was this same confident preacher that began to question if who he had been preaching about was the real deal.

This past Thursday, the pastors of the Crossroads Conference which we are a part of met at the Chapel at Augustana University for worship. This group is hosted by different churches in the conference each month and the sermons are often delivered by the pastor hosting the worship. This week something different was done instead of the sermon. As the gospel was read by the assistant to the bishop, she would stop after a sentence or two was read and then paused as asked us to respond with our thoughts of what was read by either starting with the words, “I notice...” or “I wonder.”

For instance, we must notice that John was in very different places when he spoke these different words. John was in the Jordan River when he baptized Jesus and witnessed the heavens opening and the Spirit descending and heard God’s voice say, “This is my Beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” If there ever was an event to give certainty of who Jesus was, you would think standing next to Jesus when he was baptized would be a memory that could never be shaken.

John the Baptist however was no longer in the Jordan River or in the wilderness surrounded by masses of people that wanted to hear what he had to say about Jesus when John wondered, “Are you the one?” We notice that John is now in prison.

I think we all can relate to John the Baptist’s very different responses of faith. When your job is going well and you have enough money to do what you want or when you come home from a routine checkup with your physician and you return with a clean bill of health or when those you lead where you work are happy that you are their leader or when you have a long list of friends that are eager to join you for a social gathering when you call or when you have a family gathering and everyone talks to each other and there are no thoughts of jealousy and no memories of wrongdoings or when you are happy with where you are, it is easy for all of us to believe in Jesus and say like John did, “This is the Son of God”.

But none of us lives in this kind of utopia where everything and everyone you know is without trouble. It is not difficult for all of us to know someone who is suffering if suffering hasn’t found you. Many people carry more than their share of sufferings than blessings. We notice that there were not many days between when things were heavenly with John the Baptist in the Jordan River until his faith was shaken while suffering in prison. Suffering is one of the methods Satan likes to use to cause you to question if God is for you and Satan shows up as quickly as life events change. This past week our 7-month-old granddaughter went from the happiest smiling baby to painful crying and possibly needed surgery after an accidental fall.

We never know how long suffering may last. The second lesson for today from James tells us another option to consider when experiencing suffering. This option is not one that most of us prefer. Our best option to suffering and the one we pray for is the rapid removal of our suffering. And if our suffering goes away, likely our faith will return quickly too. But if our suffering remains, we are told by James to be patient.

James tells us to be patient until the coming of the Lord. James compares patience to the waiting a farmer must go through from the time of planting until harvest. James uses the farmer as an example of how patience is necessary while waiting for the spring rains to allow the seeds to sprout and the waiting for the late rains to fill the grain for an abundant harvest. However, there is no certainty in patience. We never are guaranteed how long we must patiently wait. Using James' farmer illustration reminds me of one spring several years ago when there were enough early rains to get crops to germinate. We delayed planting one field next to where we now live for some reason and after tilling the ground there was no moisture left to germinate the beans that we planned to plant. We kept hoping that there would be a promising forecast of rain before we would plant the beans in dry soil. We waited patiently for some time, but then waiting, we decided that we would certainly never get anything if we never planted the seeds. So, we planted the seeds and waited for the rain. We waited some more. It was early July before we planted this field, and we never got enough rain to germinate these seeds until early August and then they sprouted. Our patience did not help to produce a crop. Our prayers did not turn out the way we wanted.

When John suffered in the silence of prison, Satan moved into his cell. He whispered into his ear and caused him to question if Jesus was the real Messiah or if he was to wait for another. Satan's effort weakened John's faith and John needed to hear from Jesus again. John sent messengers to Jesus to ask the question that Satan put in his mind. John's question for Jesus was a straightforward question. Are you the one who is to come? Or are we to wait for another? John wanted to simply hear either way. Yes, Jesus was who he said he was, or no he wasn't, and they were to wait for another. However, Jesus did not send back to Jesus a Yes or No response. Jesus told the messengers to respond to John what they heard and had seen Jesus doing. We wonder how John responded to this message. We notice that we are never told. Maybe it didn't matter to John that Jesus was restoring sight to the blind since he wasn't blind. Maybe it didn't matter to John that Jesus was cleansing lepers since he didn't have leprosy. Maybe it didn't matter to John that Jesus was making the lame to walk since he wasn't lame.

Or maybe it did.

Maybe the only thing that John needed was to hear what Jesus was indeed doing, what he came down from heaven to do. John, who was isolated in prison, began to question the good news that he once preached to others. John began to experience what everyone will eventually experience when separated from hearing from Jesus. Suffering or changes in your life may make you wonder if Jesus came for you or if you are to wait for another.

Jesus did not tell his messengers to tell John that he came to set the captives free (which also was one of the things John preached that Jesus would do) knowing full well that John's freedom would not come in the way of waiting for prison doors to break open. Our freedom from what makes us feel captive will not always come in the ways we expect or pray for. If our freedom depended on each of our prayers to be answered in the way we wanted them to be, our faith would be like the reed shaking in the wind that breaks when things don't go the way we want them to.

We can learn from this example of John the Baptist that the strongest of faiths can be shaken when we experience suffering or uncertainty. However, we do not have to wonder what to do when these events happen. We need Jesus to speak to us again. He can and will break through whatever barriers prevent us from hearing the good news that he came to bring. The good news from Jesus has been delivered by the most usual of messengers. They do always appear dressed in soft robes or come from places of honor. We will not have to wonder about this next week as the good news will clearly be delivered to you by the children of our parish. After hearing the good news from them, you will know that Jesus is the real deal, and you will not have to wait for another. Amen