

Matthew 11:2-11 CLP, Interim General Presbyter Kate Sillman

Call to Worship – We gather together to worship God. We do this because our ONLY help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. As sinners, we have been forgiven through Jesus Christ. So, we can joyfully enter into our worship this morning, and let's begin by reading our Call together from **Psalm 146:**

Leader: Happy are those whose help is in the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God.

People: Who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever.

Leader: The Lord sets the prisoner free, opens the eyes of the blind, and lifts up those who are bowed down.

People: The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!

ALL: Let us worship God!

Let's pray: Oh Lord, we bless your name. You bestow mercies upon us, you give sight to the blind, you have no patience with injustice, and the meek, you do not turn away. We open our hearts to your presence, and our doors to the stranger. We gather as your people, brought together by your grace and made one by your love. In your Son's name we pray, Amen.

Hymn #

Psalter Reading # 40 – Isaiah 35

Apostles Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, **and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord**: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. **I believe in the Holy Ghost**; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

Holy Scripture:

Luke 1: 46b- 55 – In our first Gospel reading, we hear Mary glorifying God through what He will do through her...

“My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

Gospel – Matthew 11: 2-11 – In our second Gospel lesson for today, Jesus refers back to the words of Isaiah that we read in our Psalter lesson, Isaiah 35.

*² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “**Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?**” ⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy^[a] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”*

⁷ As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: “‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ ¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

May God bless these readings and our hearing of His Holy Word.

Let us pray... Speak to us, Heavenly Father. This morning, reveal to us the message of your Word, the lessons of your Son Jesus Christ, and the urgings of the Holy Spirit within each one of us. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

SERMON – *Are you the one...?*

Years ago, in Reader's Digest, a lady reported searching for the perfect birthday card for her husband. She finally found one. On the outside it read: "Sweetheart, you're the answer to my prayers." On the inside it read, "You're not exactly what I prayed for, but apparently you are the answer."

In a strange way, something like this may have been running through John's mind as he sat in prison and thought about Jesus and his ministry. For years, John and his followers had hoped and prayed for a Messiah - one anointed by God to lead the nation, a deliverer who would rid the land of occupying forces, conquer all enemies, establish a great kingdom, and usher in an era of peace and prosperity. John had come to believe that the prayers had been answered, with the Messiah being none other than his own cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, but then he began to wonder. *Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?* This morning, let's dig a little deeper into our Scripture and see what the Holy Spirit has in mind for each one of us here this morning and on this 3rd Sunday of Advent.

Trouble in the text

Before we enter our Gospel lesson where we find John in prison, John had had his own ministry, and even though he resided out in the wilderness near the Jordan, great crowds came to hear him. John's powerful words called for the need for repentance **from** sin and **toward** right living. He was abrasive, insulting, almost mean at times. Then there was his appearance - wild hair and weird clothes. This along with his diet of locusts and wild honey, all made John a real interesting sort AND somewhat of an attractive mystery. Many different people had

come to hear his preaching - rich and poor alike, AND his celebrity status and the words he spoke - had beckoned even the most religious folks out to the desert to see and hear him.

John's mission was to prepare the nation for the coming of Messiah.

His words: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near...The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*

And then, one day Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized by John. Here, that memorable moment occurred when the Holy Spirit (as a dove) descended upon Jesus Christ and God spoke: *This is my Son in whom I am well pleased...* One time in the Bible when Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all present. **John knew that Jesus was the one**, but after John baptized Jesus, the two went their separate ways.

- **John** continued with his powerful preaching - **Jesus** had a somewhat different approach.
- **John** was out there in the wilderness with locusts for lunch - **Jesus** was changing water into wine.
- **John** screamed at sinners - **Jesus** ate dinner with them.
- **John** preached fire and brimstone - **Jesus** preached, *love one another.*

Then, when we enter our Gospel lesson, John is in prison, a terrible place - dirty, dark, completely repulsive. John had preached a sermon that mixed religion and politics. King Herod Antipas had begun a relationship with his half-niece, Herodias, a serious problem according

to Jewish Law. It was even worse as she was already married to his own brother. **John preached that this was all wrong.** Typically, powerful people do not like to be challenged by anyone or anything. The targeted people ignore it if they can, but when most people start to listen in, they do what they can to silence it. The people of Judea were listening and John ended up in jail.

Now, alone in his unpleasant quarters, John has time to think. He remembers the high hopes he had about Jesus being **the Messiah.** He had been prepared for the revolution, and would have been the first to volunteer to join Jesus' army. **But time went on...and on...and on.** No call to arms. In fact, the reports that had been coming in gave **no clue** that Jesus was thinking about overthrowing Caesar or Herod or anybody else. There were some intriguing stories of miraculous occurrences in places where Jesus was, but no revolution. **SO, was Jesus the Messiah?** Was Jesus the answer to the nation's prayers? All evidence seemed to indicate that Jesus was NOT turning out to be the one John and his followers prayed for. *Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?*

Trouble in the world

In our world today, do we ever find ourselves feeling let down by someone or something? Do we ever feel let down by God? Do we ever have doubts that Jesus is the one? Do we ever wonder if there really is a life for us after our earthly life is over? Do we ever question these truths that some of us have carried since childhood?

Grace in the text

² *When John...heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”* Somehow John got his question to Jesus’ followers who went to Jesus with: *Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?*

Jesus responds, *Go back and report to John what you hear and see:*
⁵ *The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.*

As John's disciples depart, Jesus turns to the crowd that had gathered: *What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind... A man dressed in fine clothes... A prophet? Yes, ..., and more than a prophet...I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. **And then Jesus** goes on to place John in the forefront of the most revered voices of God: ¹¹ *Truly I tell you, among those born ... there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist...**

Then, Jesus says some very confusing words: ⁶ *Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.* What is Jesus saying? That the Messiah has not come to ride into town on a white stallion, ready to lead an army or ascend a throne? That the Messiah who is the answer to their prayers is not at all what they expected? **It sounds as if he is saying,** "Go tell John that things may not be working out the way he imagined, **but** more and more, in surprising places, **marvelous things are happening.**"

Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, professor, author and theologian interprets the passage this way:

People who **were blind** to the love loose in the world have **received their sight**; people who were paralyzed with fear are **limber with hope**; people who were deaf from want of good news are **singing hymns**. And **best and most miraculous of all**, tell John that this is **not the work of one lonely Messiah - but the work of God, carried out by all who believe, and there is no end in sight**. Tell him **I am the one** ... but tell him also that **yes, he should look for another, and another, and another**. Tell him to **search every face for the face of God** and not get tripped up on me, because what is happening here is **bigger than any of us**. What is coming is the **Kingdom of God**.

Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?

Is Jesus' response a way of saying - don't go pinning your hopes on **someone** who will magically fix things and make everything all right. It doesn't work that way. **WE are ALL in this together. WE ALL have a part to play in making these hopes real**.

Grace in the world

Presbyterian theologian, Rev. Dr. David Leininger, said that among the Jews who celebrate Passover, there is a tradition of saving a seat at their Seder feast for **Elijah**, the prophet who is supposed to **bring the news that the Messiah has finally come** - and the one to whom **Jesus compared John**. At one moment in the service, the door is flung open for Elijah and everyone falls silent with anticipation. For thousands of

years that door has been opened, and for thousands of years all that has entered has been the wind.

Rev. Leininger told one story of a pious Jew who asked his rabbi, "**For about forty years I have opened the door for Elijah every Seder night, waiting for him to come, but he never does. What is the reason?**" The rabbi answered, "**In your neighborhood there lives a very poor family with many children.** Call on the man and propose to him that you and your family celebrate the next Passover at his house, and for this purpose provide him and his whole family with everything necessary for the eight days of Passover. Then on the Seder night, Elijah will certainly come."

The man did as the rabbi told him, but after Passover he came back and claimed that again he had waited in vain to see Elijah. The rabbi answered, "**I know very well that Elijah came on the Seder night to the house of your poor neighbor.** But, of course, you could not see him." And the rabbi held a mirror before the face of the man and said, "**Look, this was Elijah's face that night.**" For us Christians, '**Look, this was the face of Jesus that night...**'

Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?
During this Advent season and beyond, may **WE be the one...**

Let's pray... Gracious Father, help us to realize when you have given us the opportunity to be your face for those in need in our world today – and help us to do your work! Please don't let us turn away with pathetic excuses. Thank you for the people, times, and places you give us to do your work, and please nudge us to action. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Hymn

Sharing & Concerns / Morning Prayer / Lord's Prayer

Are there any folks we should add to our prayer list this morning or any joys to bring forth?

Let us go to the Lord in prayer... Heavenly Father, we thank you for the blessing of this new day and for bringing us together this morning, and for the church family gathered here to worship and glorify You.

Dear God, we pray for all those on our prayer list...

We pray for **all** those also not with us today, for all who are traveling – please keep them safe – for all those not in their own homes, the caretakers, and all who desperately need you in their lives...please help them to feel your presence.

Heavenly Father, we pray for all children in this church family **and all the adults** whom you have called to help them know You.

Dear God, we pray for our troops all over your world, those not spending the holiday season with family, all veterans who have served, those who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, those who have survived war, the families and loved ones of those who did not or still suffer. We pray for our police men and women, all medical personnel who help us when we need them, the fire fighters, all those who help victims of terrorists or disaster of any kind, and for the victims themselves. Help them to feel your presence and know that YOU are beside them. We pray for our country, our president, all of our leaders, those in our government, our churches, our schools, our communities. Please give them wisdom and guidance so that they may foster peace

and justice and serve the common good.

Heavenly Father, we pray for your church everywhere, all Christians and missions who serve you... We pray for all the folks in Thailand who are part of our Pakk 5 Nan partnership and the Mercy House orphanage. We pray for your church right here and all who lead here.

Dear God, on this third Sunday of Advent, help us look at the people around us. There are many who are lonely, poor, hungry, and without basic needs. Help us to recognize and do what we can for these 'least of these.' All of these things we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray saying, *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*

Peace - Let us now greet each other with the peace of Christ...

Offering... Dear God, receive these gifts, but most importantly, receive us. Change our hearts and our lives and use us to share the wonderful words of the gospel. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Hymn #

Benediction & Postlude – During this Advent season and beyond, please help us to realize when God has chosen us to BE THE ONE. May we step up and may the **love of God**, the **grace of our Lord Jesus Christ**, and the **fellowship of the Holy Spirit** be with us all and give us peace, Amen!

Postlude