

A Question at the End

Meta

Date: December 14, 2025; Advent 3A

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Isaiah 35

Psalms 146

James 5:7-20

Matthew 11:2-19

Opening

John the Baptist has an urgent question. The one known as the Voice crying in the wilderness; the one called Elijah who is to come, has come to the end of his days. At the end, he has one, great question.

John asks his question, not from the wilderness nor from the River Jordan where he baptized so many, but from prison. Herod Antipas imprisoned John the Baptist after John rebuked Herod for unlawfully marrying his brother's wife. Preaching repentance to kings so often means prison for the prophet. We know that John's imprisonment would not result in his release, but his execution. And it's there in prison, just before John meets his end that he wrestles with a burning question.

John had a tremendous following, and among that following several disciples. Among those disciples, an inner circle, a faithful few, visited John in prison. And to these faithful few, John speaks his question. /

Isn't it true that of the many questions one carries through life, all things distill down to one or two questions in the end? Some questions are interesting for the mind, but others burn deep in the soul. And it comes down to one question. John has a burning question and it's meant for one person and one person only. John sends those faithful few disciples from his prison to Jesus with this question: 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'

Even prophets; even the greatest prophet; even the greatest born among women has a question in the end. In his final days, John wrestles with uncertainty.

John the Uncertain

Two weeks ago we began the Advent season and I presented this season to you as a time in the year when we face the ultimate questions of our existence. We prepare both for the return of our Lord and for the day of our death by facing the ultimate questions of our relationships and our existence.

But Advent is not only preparing for the questions that *our Lord will ask us* on that great judgment day. This season is a time we bring our greatest questions to the Lord.

Here was John's question at the end of his days: 'Are you, Jesus of Nazareth, the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'

How we understand John's question and his confusion, is key for the urgent questions we bring. John the Baptist not in a spiritual spiral. He is *not* in existential free fall, on the verge of renouncing his faith. *John doesn't understand what Jesus is doing*, and even more what Jesus *isn't* doing. John is on death row and he's agitated that

The sense of John's question is: 'when are you going to get on with the program, Jesus?' The Temple is corrupt and that's why the Lord sent me to the wilderness. I fasted on a diet of locusts and wild honey because it is time for God to act; it is time for Israel to repent, from her idols, from her apostasy, from her unbelief. In the palaces of Herod there is gross sin. The king of Israel is in collusion with Rome, the oppressor of Israel. Are you, Jesus of Nazareth the one who is to come, or shall we look for another? That is the sense of John's question: *When will you bring the Kingdom of God? When will you put things right?*

Consider who asks this question. By our best accounts, one year passed from the peak of John's ministry when he baptized Jesus in the Jordan and John's imprisonment by Herod.

Remember that John the Baptist proclaimed of Jesus, 'Behold the Lamb of God!' Remember that John said Jesus would be the one to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Remember that John spoke as a witness after Jesus' baptism saying, 'I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I have seen and born witness that this is the Son of God.'¹

Such was John's faith at the River Jordan when Jesus began his ministry. But in the course of that year to the time of his imprisonment, it seems John doesn't understand what Jesus is doing. Jesus, the Lamb of God, the Son of God, the one of whom John wasn't worthy to unlace his sandals. Are you who I thought you were, or was I wrong? It's time to be the Messiah we've been waiting for.

What Jesus is doing does not make sense to John. It does not follow John's understanding of Messiah, of the prophecies, of his own vocation. Here was John's script for the Messiah: 'even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'²

And what was Jesus doing in that year between his baptism by John in the Jordan and the time John asks his urgent question from prison? Well, just take a brief tour in Matthew's Gospel between Matthew 3-11. What is Jesus the Messiah doing? Pouring out the mercy of God upon people who are hurting. His foremost action is *healing*. From Matthew 5-7, Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount. Overall though, Matthew shows us that Jesus is busy with the work of healing hurting, oppressed, possessed, and wounded sons and daughters of God.

¹ John 1.32-34

² Matthew 3.10

The Kingdom Revealed

John was not wrong that the Messiah would bring judgment. Jesus Christ is the Judge of the Living and the Dead, as we say in the Creed. But John did not understand that Messiah would reveal his power by revealing mercy first.

Jesus proclaims a Kingdom that unquestionably has political implications. But Jesus does not reveal the power of his Kingdom by fixing what is wrong in the palace or by ending the Roman occupation first. Jesus proclaims repentance, to be sure. But Jesus begins preaching his Sermon on the Mount with words of grace, words of blessing. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' And when the words of the Sermon on the Mount end, the works of grace and blessing flood the regions of Galilee. Jesus brings healing, restoration, and joy to hurting, wounded people. Jesus goes to hurting people first, not to the palace. That's how we encounter the power of Messiah.

John is a man whose days are numbered. One can imagine that he simply wants a straight answer for his great question. But this John does not receive. Jesus does not reply, "I am He. I am the Messiah." No, he answers John's question with Scripture:

*Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.*³

What Scripture was Jesus quoting? Isaiah 35, which we read earlier, and Isaiah 61. What was John's handbook for understanding his own life and work? Isaiah 40. John knew Isaiah and lived by Isaiah's prophecy. John knew these Scriptures but couldn't see the full mystery of the Gospel. Even the greatest born among women needed to hear the Gospel anew. Because he had a deep question, too. Even if it was a question that arose from his frustration, from the darkness of his prison, John needed to hear the *fullness of the Gospel*. The Voice who cried in the wilderness, now crying out from prison, needed the very Word of God Incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, to proclaim good news to him.

The Joy of a Kingdom, Greater than our Imagination

Never underestimate your need to hear the gospel again. Never think you fully comprehend the whole story and you've heard it all before. Frustration arises when we're so self-assured we understand everything. John needed the revelation of the gospel that was more than he could have imagined.

The joy of heaven breaking in now on earth was the great interruption in our redemption story that no one expected. The joy of the gospel was both an *eruption* and an *interruption*. An eruption of mercy, grace, and healing. An interruption to the expectation that the healing of the nations would only come at the end, after the world, with all her thrones, dominions, and powers had been set right by Messiah. Who could have imagined that the long awaited Messiah, anointed by the Lord to come to his people and set them free from their enemies, would come and make a priority of eating with tax collectors and sinners?

Our King and Savior who now draws near. Yes he is the Judge of the Living and the Dead, but he is the lover of mercy. As we sing in one of our favorite carols, 'He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.' /

³ *Matthew 11.4-6*

I believe we live in a judgment thirsty world. Some of that desire for judgment is right and just where we witness grievous wrongs. But there is also the thirst for judgment that becomes obsessive. (This is true in American life and it is true in our politics). When we live in a judgment obsessed world, it also means we live in world suffering from the poverty of true joy.

And here is where the Church has a witness. For centuries western Christians have believed that Advent is both a season of preparing for our final judgment *and* a season of embracing the joy of Jesus Christ. It is not either/or, but both/and. And today is the third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday. (Gaudete is a command, 'Rejoice!') It's an imperative!

Why is it an imperative? Because it was Jesus' imperative to restore goodness and joy to his creation. This he brings *before* he comes in final judgment. And so, my brothers and sisters, let us take up the imperative of joy in our judgment obsessed world.

In the midst of John's darkness and imprisonment, Jesus cast the light of joy happening in the Kingdom of God. So look upon things the Lord has made right, not only on the things still wrong. Look upon the blind now seeing, marvel at the dead that are raised, at the deaf who now hear music, at the lame who now dance, at the poor who finally hear and experience good news. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Rejoice in the Lord and meditate on the work of God around you that is good and true and beautiful!

St. Paisios the Athonite spoke to his spiritual children once and said there are two kinds of insects who feed themselves in a pasture or meadow. The dung fly moves from one cow patty to the next and that's all. But the honeybee moves from wildflower to wildflower, drawing out the full sweetness, the most nectar it can savor from each blossom.

Let the honeybee be our teacher in a world filled with so much brokenness, so much that has gone wrong, so much that needs to be redeemed. Take joy and feed your soul on the good work that God is doing now to redeem his world.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. This, too, I have learned from bees. They have a siege mentality when they find an abundance of goodness.

Last summer I was trying to prune a lavender shrub about a month after the first flowers appeared. I was trying to cut the stems back to have another generation of lavender flowers to grow up in late summer. I never was able to prune the whole bush because a host of bees was always dancing from flower to flower. It was like a collective assault on every last drop of nectar in my lavender shrubs.

And this is what happens for all who are thirsting for the kingdom of God—when we find the goodness, mercy, and grace of God breaking into this broken world, we take it into ourselves with all the force we can muster. And force it we must, because otherwise, we could be overwhelmed by sadness and darkness.

Rejoice—an imperative for the Advent people of God. Rejoice, take hold, and savor the works of Jesus' redemption wherever you see and hear the signs of his Kingdom.

When you see the baptism of a newborn son or daughter; when you hear of a husband and wife completing the adoption of a child; when you hear about a young Christian preparing to be a missionary overseas; when you hear the testimony of an ex-offender who confesses Jesus as Lord, who takes up meaningful work in our city after incarceration, rejoice in the redemption of God happening *now*. Rejoice in prayers answered, in hearts full of gratitude; rejoice when relationships are

mended; rejoice when you witness a soul bearing her suffering with courage and patient endurance; rejoice when the Word of God brings to life something within your heart that you thought would never live again. *Let us savor the goodness we see and hear, a world being restored in the Name of Jesus Christ. Rejoice and take heart that the Kingdom comes with healing on its wings.* And all for the glory of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.