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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/11/2016, The Third Sunday of Advent
James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"
(Matthew 11:2-3, RSV)

Such are the ebbs and flows of life that at one moment we are young and strong and bold, and the next we are staggering and downhearted. All had been well, and we imagined that it would continue so, but then, one day, we looked up and found ourselves vulnerable and weak and wondering about things.

So it was with John the Baptist. We had our Baptist banner hanging last Sunday too. On that Sunday, John was doing well. Multitudes had flocked out to the desert to hear his preaching, and he preached like a lion. He was bold, fierce, challenging. He preached with strong images:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (Matthew 3:7, RSV)

¹⁰Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:10, RSV)

¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:12, RSV)

Little delicacy here. No nuance here. The man was like Samson. He seemed invincible – a force of nature. Like Samson grabbing the jawbone of an ass and slaying a thousand men therewith (Judges 15:15), so John the Baptist grabbed whatever images lay at hand — wilderness images of trees being cut down, agricultural images of the chaff being burned — and he contended with sin. He spoke more than once of fire — of trees being cut down and thrown into the fire. He even spoke of something that firefighters would dread: an "unquenchable fire." What a nightmare! The chaff gets burned with unquenchable fire. John was a strong, confident preacher. Last Sunday.

But look at him now. He has been taken down a notch, which sometimes happens to us. The open spaces of the wilderness, which John seemed to love, have been replaced by the narrow confines of a cell. The wind and fresh air that swept through his desert do not blow in his prison. The sunlight by day and the moon by night hardly reach down into his dungeon. The crowds are gone. The freedom of his movements, to climb a mountain or to lie down in the shade of a tree... that freedom has been replaced by bars. And his future – that future that looked so promising to a young and strong man – nowadays it is looking pretty grim. John has offended a powerful man – the king. He is in prison now. His terrible end will soon come. He will be beheaded.

His spirit now seems shaken. And so he asks his question of Jesus:

“Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?”
(Matthew 11:3, RSV)

Earlier, back when John was a free man, he had confidently pointed toward Jesus:

²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.’” (John 1:29-30, RSV)

Now he sends disciples to Jesus, wondering whether he has been wrong:

“Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?”
(Matthew 11:3, RSV)

If John is wrong, it is going to be hard *for him* to “look for another.” His life has about run its course. If he erred in pointing to Jesus, then it was a fundamental mistake. If he erred, then he backed the wrong Saviour.

So he sends his disciples to Jesus. I bet it would have been music to John’s ears if Jesus had sent back the message, “Hold on, my dear old friend. I am going to send twelve legions of angels to rescue you. They are going to wreck King Herod’s jail. Herod will not be able to keep you. He will be far outmatched by my angels. Do not give up, John. Do not despair. I will rescue you.”

But Jesus did not answer that way.

Instead, Jesus answered with words that I bet were indeed music to John’s ears, though they spoke not a word about rescue for the man. Jesus answered by speaking of the blind and the halt... of the lepers and deaf:

⁴And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the 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.” (Matthew 11:4-5, RSV)

These wonders signified the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. Isaiah, for example, had spoken of such things (Isaiah 35). These wonders signified that the God of Israel was on the side of Jesus of Nazareth. So, when John’s disciples returned to the dungeon and told their master all that they had heard and seen in Jesus, well, I bet the narrow confines of that jail cell could not contain the spirit of the Baptist. His thoughts could soar. His hopes could rise. His joy could climb. He could think to himself, “If these things be true, then be patient, my soul. Be patient. In time, Jesus will save me too.”

Back there in the countryside, Jesus speaks with pride of John the Baptist. John is no reed shaken by the wind, Jesus says. John is a prophet, says the One who should know. Indeed John is “more than a prophet,” Jesus declares. It is pretty clear that though Jesus has not promised to rescue John, he cherishes the man nonetheless. And in the fullness of time, Jesus will indeed rescue John. He will rescue you and me too.

Till then we should enjoy the adventures set before us. Life will have its ebbs and flows. One day we will be strong and confident. The next day we will be knocked down a notch and left wondering about things. But, my friends, let us never wonder about this: Let us never wonder whether we are wandering this earth alone, for we are not alone. The same Jesus who reassured John the Baptist is watching over us, and all will be well. All will be well. Simply live your life as best you can in Jesus’s name, and all will be well.

Again, let not wonder whether the final meaning of our lives depends on a coin flip... on the unpredictability of health and wealth and vocation and sometimes fickle friends. These years granted to us are ours to enjoy, by God’s plan and will. Life might knock us about, but as long as our heart is still beating, let’s bounce back up and renew the adventures that lie before us in the name of Jesus Christ. All will be well in the end for the end belongs to Jesus and he is trustworthy.

Whether we be free people, enjoying the wide open spaces of the wilderness, or whether we be constrained in some prison, let us cultivate within ourselves the particular virtue spoken of by St. James in this morning’s Epistle Lesson: the virtue of patience. The apostle writes this:

⁷Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your

hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. (James 5:7-8, NRSV)

Let me move toward the end of this sermon by speaking of John *after* Jesus sends back his message to him. We do not hear much about John the Baptist after this morning's story. We know that the wife of King Herod hated John. We know that Herod himself knew John to be a righteous and holy man (Mark 6), and that Herod would gladly hear John preach. I picture the king gathering up his robes, grabbing a stool, carrying it down the steps, down the many steps into the dungeon, sitting there and listening to John. The Bible says that the king was perplexed by John:

...Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly. (Mark 6:20, RSV)

Herod listened gladly to John until that day when he beheaded John. Herod will have to answer for that someday. But meanwhile, notice what a great thing was said of John the Baptist: Herod recognized that in John he was dealing with "a righteous and holy man."

I conclude, then, that John was not spoiled by his final conversation with Jesus. John's disciples came back, speaking of the healing of the blind and the lame and the comforting of the poor and afflicted. This was good enough for John. He spent the time left to him patiently. He exercised that virtue spoken of by St. James. It was with John the Baptist as it was with St. Paul:

I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. (Philippians 4:11, KJV)

Contentment based in Christ: that is the secret of patience. John's prison cell might have been a small one, but he did not let that smallness diminish his goodness or his hopes for that greater One, whose sandals he knew himself unworthy to stoop down and untie.

Such are the ebbs and flows of life that at one moment we are young and strong and bold, and the next we are staggering and downhearted. All had been well, and we imagined that it would continue so, but then, one day, we looked up and found ourselves vulnerable and weak and wondering about things. But never wonder overmuch. Never worry overmuch. Jesus is coming again. He is at hand. So strengthen your heart and live for him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.