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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, November 15, 2023  
Matthew 11:1-19  
Doubting John

HOLY GOSPEL ..... Matthew 11:1-19, RSV

<sup>1</sup>And when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.

<sup>2</sup>Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup>and said to him, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" <sup>4</sup>And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>And blessed is he who takes no offense at me."

<sup>7</sup>As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup>Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses. <sup>9</sup>Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup>This is he of whom it is written,

'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face,  
who shall prepare thy way before thee.'

<sup>11</sup>Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. <sup>12</sup>From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force. <sup>13</sup>For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; <sup>14</sup>and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. <sup>15</sup>He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

<sup>16</sup>"But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates,

<sup>17</sup>'We piped to you, and you did not dance;  
we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

<sup>18</sup>For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; <sup>19</sup>the Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

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

You have heard tell of Doubting Thomas. Let me tell you of Doubting John — John the Baptist. This is a great story of the patience of Jesus.

The causes John had for believing in Jesus kept piling up, from when they were both infants in the womb all the way to this point, when John is in prison. Our text says that John heard about the deeds of Jesus there in prison. Let me lift up that early line in this evening's reading:

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

This strikes me as a rather strange thing. What deeds did John hear about? I mean, Jesus went all about Galilee doing good. In fact, Jesus enumerates his deeds:

<sup>5</sup>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. (Matthew 11:5, RSV)

Why should such deeds cause John to wonder whether Jesus is the one for whom Israel has been waiting? These deeds of Jesus are in harmony with the great things John the Baptist has known about Jesus since before they were even born. Recall the striking testimony of John's mother, Elizabeth, when she was in the presence of Mary, also pregnant, with Jesus:

<sup>41</sup>And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! (Luke 1:41-42, RSV)

Then later, as grown men, had not John witnessed the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus? John had protested that he needed to be baptized of Jesus—not the other way around. But Jesus pressed for the baptism and the holy scene unfolded before John:

<sup>15</sup>But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." Then he

consented. <sup>16</sup>And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; <sup>17</sup>and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

How could John witness such a thing and then wonder whether Jesus is the long awaited one?

Just before that mighty scene, had not John testified that he was not worthy to carry the sandals of the one coming after him? And then he saw that dove descend on Jesus — the mightier one than John himself. How, then, could John doubt Jesus?

Finally had not John pointed to Jesus and directed others toward Him? Listen to the passage:

<sup>29</sup>The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup>This 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)

How is it that John the Baptist, after so many dealings with Jesus, should now wonder whether Jesus is, as John puts it, "he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Jesus sends word back to John listing the good deeds that Jesus is doing. Jesus is patient with John in listing these good deeds, and yet there is also a touch of disappointment in what Jesus says, for he finishes his words with this beatitude — one meant for John: "And blessed is he who takes no offense at me" (Matthew 11:6).

For me, this is an important story because it illustrates for us that Jesus can be hurt by us, and disappointed with us, and yet not give up on us. It is a story of our Lord's patience.

So, John's disciples return to the prison to give their report to John. As they go, Jesus speaks of John. He does not mutter that John has disappointed him. He does not complain that after all the evidence John has seen, that man should not have doubts about Jesus. Instead, Jesus gives the highest praise to John that has ever been awarded on earth:

<sup>11</sup>Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:11, RSV)

Today we stand; tomorrow we might fall. No one is really safe until our story is told to the final breath and we are received into heaven. Till then, even the least of those in heaven are greater than those on earth — greater even than John the Baptist. And yet, clearly, Jesus has respect and affection for John. John has doubted him, but Jesus goes on being fond of him anyhow.

When I sit at the Pastor's Booth, sometimes people sit down and tell me that they do not believe in God. You would think that that would alarm me — that it would alarm any pastor. But it does not really trouble me much. I figure that people might deny the existence of God or doubt his existence, but, then, some denials and some doubts are just not all that important. When people say that they doubt the existence of God, I wonder what in the world they mean by "God." Maybe if I understood "God" that way, I would doubt him too. The idea of "God" is so abstract, that it is hard to know what people are talking about. And so I try to gently lead folks to a happier and more concrete subject: I try to lead them to Jesus of Nazareth. They know what a good man or a good woman is like. So, I ask them to think of Jesus as a good man. What we read in the Bible of him says that he is so — he is a good man. Then I ask the doubting one to imagine that Easter is true. Imagine that this good man has conquered death. This is an intriguing idea. All of my Pastor's Booth people have thought so. A pastor has to start somewhere. I start with this good man Jesus of Nazareth and share my idea that I believe the report about his resurrection and find the world to be a better place because of it. So have millions upon millions of people.

Maybe something like this has happened in this evening's story about John the Baptist. John has wondered whether Jesus is, as he puts it, "he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" It could be an honest question from John and very important to him. But Jesus might think to himself, who knows what John means by "he who is to come"? John might be thinking of a warrior Messiah. Most people did. Especially John might be thinking of the one he had spoken of — the one who will burn with unquenchable fire:

<sup>12</sup>His 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)

Well, of course, there is truth in what John had said. He had in fact prophesied of Jesus, though it might take a lot of preaching to explain it all. Meanwhile Jesus goes his own way. And that is a good thing. Jesus is not captive to John's image of who he is. Jesus is not captive to my image either, or yours. Jesus simply is who he is. He walks his own path. But it is a very good path. It costs Jesus a lot, but it is a good path. It is the path of He who is our Saviour, and to

whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever.  
Amen.