**A Messenger Before Your Face**

Based on [Matthew 11:2-15](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt11.2-15)

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The Third Sunday in Advent

Pastor Nathan Fuehrer

Today’s scripture teaches that those who cast aside all worldly expectations have ears to hear the Word of God. (1) This is First because the deeds of Christ are not what we would expect. (2) Second this is because Christ’s messengers are not who we would expect. (3) And third, this is because the passive suffering of Christ and His church at the hands of the violent is not what we would expect. These three things, the deeds of Christ, his messengers, and suffering are causes of offense and stumbling for those who have worldly expectations of success, victory, honour and glory here. But those with ears to hear know that the success, and honour and victory await them in heaven.

The deeds of Christ are not what we would expect. They are not what John the Baptist expected. John expected the deeds of the Coming Christ to be judgment and wrath and condemnation of all the injustice that God’s enemies have gotten away with until now. John was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins because the Christ was on his way, with his winnowing fork in his hand gathering his wheat into the barn and throwing the chaff into the furnace of unquenchable fire. And John is right, because that’s exactly what will happen when Jesus Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead. The scriptures say so, and John new it and was sent by God to preach it.

But before the Christ would come in judgment, he would come to heal and to save. When John in prison sends his disciples to ask Jesus if He is the messiah to come, Jesus points him to His deeds. “**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.**” John never preached these deeds of the Christ, but they are what Isaiah the prophet said He would do. This no doubt gave comfort and assurance to John who was in prison…who had expected Jesus to bring justice rather than allowing his messenger to suffer injustice, imprisonment at the hands of the Herod the fox.

(2) The Second reason you need to cast aside all worldly expectations to Hear the Word of God is because Christ’s messengers are not who we would expect.

After John’s disciples left, Jesus turns to the crowds and rebukes their doubts of John and his ministry. He exposes the conceit of their worldly expectations, as they were likely now doubting John’s ministry because he was in prison. “He can’t have really been a prophet of God if he’s now in prison; God wouldn’t allow his messengers to be treated so.”

The world expects a messenger from God to be a reed in the wind, bending his doctrine to whatever the people want to hear. **So you have family that wants communion, even if they’re not Lutheran, that is, they hold to some false doctrine.** … “Love wins”, I will change what God’s word says about fellowship and communion to make you happy. Reed in the wind.

The world expects a messenger to be a priss. “What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses.” The world expects a messenger from God to have creased shirt sleeves and detailed cars. John wore camel’s hair and ate locusts and wild honey. Yet he was sent by God.

The world expects a messenger to be distant. Moses, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel…they are prophets. And there’s a comfort in having dead prophets, or truth providers who aren’t in your face. You can think Jeremiah is your buddy because he’s not here, to tell confront your face.

Jesus quotes the prophet Malachi, “What then did you come out to see? A prophet? Yes. I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger **before your face,** who will prepare your way before you. Truly, I day to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.”

Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, it’s easy to listen to them, because they’re dead. They live, with God waiting for the resurrection of the dead. You can have their names in a bible on your shelf and they’re only in your face when you open it. And even when you open it, you can twist their words to justify yourself and they can’t do anything about it. Having prophets who are dead men, words on a page like Moses and Elijah, that’s what the crowds expected.

But John was “in their face” as any true preacher is today. “This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger ***before your face***.” **People were then saying, “I believe what, Moses says…what Elijah says, but this new preacher…this *John*, I reject. He’s too \_\_\_\_\_\_, he’s not \_\_\_\_\_\_ enough. Moses and Elijah, they were professionals**. This John he’s too unprofessional…not a gentleman at all. “Robe of camels hair, eating locusts and wild honey…what a barbarian, bohemian, uncultured, unrefined, he’s an embarrassment before the world I know, and he’s trying to tell me how to live my life…He’s no Moses or Elijah.”

So too all preachers today, who don’t base their office on their readiness to bend god’s word, or their prissiness, are in your face; but on the pure doctrine of Christ…Jesus says listen to them. **That’s why he still Calls pastors and preachers, now until the end of the age, to be “before your face.”** You can say “I don’t need a preacher, I have the bible, I have Moses, Elijah, John, and Jesus” Yes, but if you can open and shut their mouths at will, by opening and shutting the scriptures when you please, you will not hear them. But a preacher, you have to listen to, because he is in your face, and this is pleasing to God.

Jesus says, “For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.” Jesus says, “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.” You prefer Moses or Elijah…Jesus says John is every bit as great as them, but Moses and Elijah aren’t before your face right now. If they were, you’d reject them, just as their people rejected them in their time. But John is here and you reject him because he’s before you, before your face, and you can’t close his book, like Moses or Elijah, he’s here and calling you to repentance. Listen to him. He’s here and pointing you to me, the Christ.”

“Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.” This is because John was the forerunner. He did not have what you have; he was even confused about the humility of the messiah, you need not be. Because, though you wait for Jesus to come, you know he already has first, to justify you, to die on the cross for your sins and justify you, and all who accept it.

Finally, reason you need to cast aside all worldly expectations to Hear the Word of God is because the passive suffering of Christ and His church at the hands of the violent is not what the world would expect. John, **who preached like a boss at the Jordan, is now in prison. Eventually he will be beheaded there**. Jesus comes to save, but he will be unacceptable to some and will be rejected, because he’s not what the world considers “a winner.” He will suffer pain and injustice on the cross willingly, and not fight back or save himself. And so some will be offended, “scandalized” by the idea of a suffering savior and will turn to idols that promise prissy salvation, but never deliver. Yet Jesus says, “Blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me.”

“From the days of John the Baptist until now,” Jesus says, “the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force.” The unexpected thing about Jesus when he came to the world, and about the kingdom of heaven is that it can be resisted and evil men can come and turn people away from the kingdom and silence God’s word. This is not because God is powerless, but because he ordained that when he sent his son to save, he would not force belief. “If you are willing to accept it” Jesus says. So too, God brings his kingdom of grace to be accepted not by force but by faith. And the one who has faith, by the power of the Spirit, accept the kingdom. And the one who doesn’t tries to take the kingdom by force, violently oppressing the faithful and thinking their pressed suits and dead prophets help them stand before God. They will fall.

But you, who suffer violence for righteousness sake, you turn the other cheek when oppressed. The violent will come to take your worldly possessions, maybe your job maybe your reputation and they might take it by force. Don’t fight back; suffer and preach the gospel. “As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke the name of the lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the world uses that as proof of its victory. But it has already lost. There is coming a new heaven and a new earth, and as Isaiah the prophet says, “No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.