**What Did You Expect to See?**

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

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Third Sunday in Advent ~ *Gaudete*

Pastor Nathan Fuehrer

Today’s Gospel is about the proof that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of God, and how this is known only by prophecy and the fulfillment of God’s Word…not by the worldly success of his followers.

John the Baptist is in prison. And he sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask him whether he is the messiah or whether they should wait for another. It sounds like John is doubting--or maybe his disciples are doubting--that Jesus is the Christ. **In any case, someone has doubts, and these doubts apparently (and naturally) arise from certain facts.** For instance: the fact is that John the Baptist--the forerunner and most outspoken advocate of Jesus--is rotting away in prison; and Jesus doesn’t seem to be doing anything about it.

This is a classic theological problem. **If God is all good and all powerful, why doesn’t he stop people he loves from suffering?** If Jesus is God’s messiah, and John is his true friend and advocate, why doesn’t Jesus use his special status and divine power to vindicate John and rescue him from prison?

This theological problem is older than John the Baptist. The Old Testament is replete with examples. **God has a long record of allowing his people to suffer and even die unjustly at the hands of sinners.** Abel was murdered. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt. David was ruthlessly pursued by Saul. Elijah pursued by Ahab and Jezebel**. And most pointedly, Job--the righteous servant of God--lost every earthly thing so swiftly that it couldn’t just be coincidence.** In fact, the entire book of Job is to make the point, also made in the lives of other Old Testament saints, that ***suffering and failure in this world is not a reliable indication of God’s feelings towards you***.

But this lesson is easily forgotten. Even the most faithful men are still sinners by nature, and so John and/or his disciples entertain a doubt. If 1) Jesus is the messiah and 2) if John his friend, then why doesn’t he save him from prison? **Well if the conclusion is wrong, one of the premises must be wrong.** Jesus leaves John in prison, and John is certainly Jesus friend, that must mean Jesus isn’t the messiah. So John’s disciples ask him: “**Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?**”

First, Jesus responds to their doubts by comparing his actions with the Word of God. The prophet Isaiah said that the messiah would *heal the sick, raise the dead, and preach the gospel to the poor.* So **Jesus answered them, “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**.” In other words, Jesus is saying “if you want to know who the messiah is, you don’t need to ask me, (whom you clearly doubt). Ask the scriptures. They have described the messiah. *By the Word of the Lord you will see that I am he*.”

Then he says, “**And blessed is the one who is not offended by me**.” The idea that God would send a messiah who did not immediately end all the oppression of his people is offensive. But consider this, *the only reason you would be offended that God would allow you to suffer is if you think you’re not a sinner*. Let that sink in. A sinner has no right to happiness; but the sinner still has an unjustified sense of entitlement and is ever inclined to play the victim.

How can sinful man possibly play the victim before God? Well,*Maybe you think your sins are really God’s fault…that he “made you this way”*. Or maybe you “flip the script,” and reason to God that you only sin because you suffer. “Yeah, well You hit me first” // “I’m only taking what belongs to me” // “If I did wrong its only because you started it” /// “Hurt people, hurt people” we are told. And so *if God would just end the suffering, we would stop sinning. But He won’t and “that’s on Him.”*

It’s just not true that hurt people hurt people. ***Jesus*** never hurt anyone. Sinners hurt people. // **Suffering does not cause sin; sin causes suffering.** And unless you not only confess, but *believe and understand* that you are by nature a poor miserable sinner who deserves nothing but hell and punishment, and are wholly dependent upon the mercy and grace of God; --unless you believe *that*, Jesus will disappoint you every time. Our sin must be bitter for Jesus to be sweet. So he says, “**Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.**” It’s another way of saying, blessed is the one who comes to me for mercy, for he will never be offended by a cross. He will find what he seeks, and his joy will be full.

John’s disciples leave, and Jesus turns to the crowds. He knows in their hearts that they are thinking the same thing, “why is John still in prison? That doesn’t make sense”. So he corrects their thoughts, “**What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man*2* dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. 9What then did you go out to see? A prophet?*3* Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet**.”

In a vale of tears and a world of unrighteousness John is exactly where a prophet should be. **A prophet receives a prophet’s reward. In the world, that reward is persecution, opposition. yes even a prison cell.** This is no surprise. All the prophets suffered. So what did you expect to see?...that a world under the influence of Satan would welcome a true prophet of the Lord into kings houses? Don’t be so naïve.

John is a true prophet of the Lord, but this gospel is not about John. It is about the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven who is greater than John. **The one who came down from heaven, was born of the virgin Mary and suffered for the sins of the world. The son of God who made himself nothing by concealing his own glory--*He* is greater than John.** John only points to the messiah; but Jesus ***is*** the Christ. And if Jesus is greater than John, how much more will Satan attack him? How much more will the world use its resources to persecute him. How much more will the powers and principalities of this present darkness humiliate him--and his body the church--so that eyes who see his suffering, without believing his word, doubt his power to save?

Why does God allow his people to suffer? That’s a question for an unbeliever. ***But you know your savior.*** // Don’t be surprised if you see a prophet of God unjustly detained in prison. You know that the very Son of God was betrayed into the hands of sinful men, was crucified, died and was buried, and this all happened with the blessing of the ruling authorities. **But it was the will of the Lord to crush him, because his broken body and shed blood atoned for the sin of the whole world**. And that body and blood is given here for your forgiveness in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Those who come to Jesus to avoid a cross, will be disappointed. // **Those who come to receive mercy will go home justified.** // And if after having received your heart’s desire you are given a cross, don’t be surprised or dismayed. ***Like the apostle Paul and all the prophets and martyrs before and after him--in your sufferings you bear in your body the marks of Christ, the crucified one.*** And those marks are the glory of God shining like a lamp in a world of darkness. Truly, truly I say to you, the darkness will not overcome it.