

Sermon
December 14th, 2025
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10 • Luke 1:46b-55 • James 5:7-10 • Matthew
11:2-11

Are you the one or are we to wait for another? John is in Herod's prison when he sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus this question. We might wonder why he asks this. Didn't he know that Jesus was the Messiah? Didn't he leap in recognition in his mother Elizabeth's womb when Mary visited her? John witnessed the descent of the Spirit like a dove at Jesus's baptism and heard God's word "This is my beloved..."? How then, could John ask this question?

We might take solace in the fact that even this fiery prophet could doubt. We might find it comforting, a feeling of reassurance as we experience our own doubts.

What if it isn't doubt that John is experiencing? What if it's disappointment? What if John's real question, deep down, isn't "Are you the one...?" but rather "How can you be the one - how can you be the one when I am confined to the darkness of this prison cell? How can you be the one, when nothing around me seems to be changing? When Herod is still on the throne? When injustice still reigns? When I am suffering? When the kingdom I proclaimed has not arrived as I expected? What if John was so certain that Jesus was a Messiah who would sweep in in a big bold way that he can't believe that the kingdom could come the way Jesus is bringing it, and he is grappling with disappointment from that prison cell?

John was imagining fire and judgement and instead Jesus is healing, dining with sinners, touching lepers, blessing the poor. Judgement hasn't yet fallen on Herod or on the corrupt systems of that day: the "fire" looks awfully gentle! Jesus's ministry is quiet,

gentle, slow. No axe at the root of the trees. No overthrow of Herod. No miraculous release from prison.

Two thousand years later, is this also our question? How can Jesus be the one when the world still looks like this? How can he be the one when wars continue, when injustice deepens, when sorrow fills the lives of those we love? How can he be the one when we find ourselves in our own prisons—prisons of grief, fear, illness, disappointment, limitation?

Our other readings for today offer a way to hold this question.

Isaiah gives us a vision of what God's redemption looks like when it comes:

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad... the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the lame shall leap like a deer." Jesus echoes this imagery in his answer to John. He is saying, "Yes—the promises are unfolding, not in thunderclaps, but in lives restored one by one."

The Magnificat—Canticle 18—sings this same truth in Mary's voice. She praises the God who scatters the proud, lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, and keeps faith with the promises made to Israel. Mary's song insists that God's justice arrives not through spectacle but through surprising reversals, tender mercies, and the raising up of those the world overlooks.

James counsels the early church: "Be patient, therefore... until the coming of the Lord." He invites us to imagine faith as a kind of steady farming—slow growth, unseen roots, gradual unfolding. He reminds us that God's timing often looks nothing like our own expectations.

John expected the kingdom to come in great sweeping gestures, a decisive end to all that was wrong. But notice: Jesus's answer is a catalogue of small, particular mercies. The blind see—one person at a time. The lame walk—one step at a time. The

sick are healed—not whole cities at once, but face to face, hand to hand, eye to eye.

Jesus is saying that God's kingdom does not come all at once, but person by person, act by act, life by life. Justice and mercy don't arrive in abstractions—they arrive through encounter.

When Jesus is asked “Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?”, why doesn't he simply say, “Yes!”? Is he avoiding the question? No - his answer is much more direct than we might think at first.

Jesus says, “Go and tell John what you see.” In other words: Yes, I am the One—and you are part of what that means.

Notice, when Jesus hears John's question he doesn't go to John to respond directly. He sends John's disciples back with the message. You tell him what you see. You carry the news. You become the witnesses. You participate in the healing I am doing.

It is as if Jesus says to them—and to us—**I need you.** I need your eyes to notice where the kingdom is breaking in. I need your words to carry hope to those who cannot yet see it. I need your hands to continue the work of mercy. I need your presence in the places where people feel imprisoned.

Yes, Jesus is the one. But the coming of the kingdom is not something we wait for from a distance. It is something we join. Something we carry. Something we enact. John's question is our question. And Jesus's answer is also our calling.

This is the Third Sunday of Advent—Gaudete, the Sunday of joy. Joy does not come because every prison is opened or every sorrow lifted, but because God is already at work in ways small and particular, often through us. The poet Mary Oliver said this:

“We shake with joy, we shake with grief.

What a time they have, these two

housed as they are in the same body.”

Joy and sorrow are housed in the same body, neither one cancels the other out. We are invited to rejoice not because the world is suddenly made whole, but because God is with us in it. We are called to rejoice not as denial, not as forced cheerfulness, but because we are not alone.

Like John, we may carry disappointment. We may wonder how Jesus can be the one when the world remains so wounded, when injustice persists, when our own hopes have not unfolded as we imagined.

Jesus's answer to John is his answer to the Church in every generation: look for the signs of the kingdom in the places you might least expect them—in the healing that happens one relationship at a time, in the courage that rises in suffering, in compassion offered quietly and faithfully, in justice sought persistently and without spectacle. Tell what you see. Bear witness. Participate.

In a few moments, we'll share in our Advent ritual, offering words for our tree responding to these questions: Where have you glimpsed God's joy breaking into ordinary life? What brings joy to your heart even in challenging times? What joy do you want to share with someone else this week?

This is part of our participation. This is part of our acknowledgement that we need Jesus and he needs us. He needs us to recognize that we are part of the coming of the kingdom, and he needs us not to let any disappointment we might have that the kingdom doesn't come in big, bold gestures close us off. Jesus needs us to join in the coming of the kingdom hand to hand, heart to heart, one encounter, one healing, one movement toward freedom at a time.

Jesus, the Christ, is the One—and he chooses to come through the lives we offer, the love we embody, and the hope and joy we refuse to relinquish. Jesus says to all of us: I need you. Go and tell

what you have seen. May we tell of the light we have seen in the darkness. May we tell of joy and sorrow housed in the same body, as the poet Mary Oliver says. May we tell of a love that is stronger than anything. In Jesus name. Amen.