

“Get Set ...” – Mt 11:2-11 – Advent 3 – Dec 12, 2004

Things were not going well for John. It had been rough at times – in fact, rough most of the time, but this time it looked pretty bad. In prison, with the Governor after his head, this time it looked pretty serious. He’d had a hard life up until now – driven by his faith, driven by who knows what voices, what voice, into the desert.. Driven back out of the desert by the same forces of faith to proclaim a message of the coming of the Messiah. Tough food, rough clothing, thronging crowds, attacks from church and state – no, it had been a short life, but not sweet.

And yet it was not all bad. People had heard his message to repent, to prepare themselves for the coming of the one who would follow. They had heard, and better yet, had reacted, had responded by confessing their sins, repenting of them and signaling their response through being baptized in the Jordan. To be sure, there were plenty of people, especially the ones who professed a faith in God, who continued obviously along their path, certain and sure that they knew what was right, especially what was right for others.

But things were definitely not going well. Arrested, dumped into prison, awaiting a probable death. Had it been worth it? Could he have been wrong? Where was the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one, the promised one that he was so sure would arrive any day? Would that saviour arrive in time to save him? It had all seemed so real, so urgent. He was sure that the Messiah would arrive, perhaps had already arrived, to bring peace to a land torn apart by warfare and strife, to bring justice to God’s people suffering under the boots of a foreign oppressor, to bring retribution to the wicked and restoration to the righteous.

His excitement, his urgency had been shared by others, had infected thousands, if not more. Rapt followers, dedicated disciples had listened to his every word, had supported him, had worked with him in spreading the news of the coming promised one, and they stood by him still, even as things seemed to be coming completely unglued, even as events wound down a dark spiral in this prison.

Naturally enough, others had surfaced claiming to be the one – it seemed every week there was another who would claim the title, grasp for the adoration. But not one of these would-be Messiahs could stand the test of time – not one of them could hold up to simple questioning, let alone any serious investigation.

And yet ... and yet there was one who seemed genuine enough. Certainly he had attracted large crowds of devout followers. The rumours about him were increasing every day, every day new stories of what he had done filtered even through the thick walls of the forbidding prison. John had to know. In what could possibly be the closing hours of his life, he had to find out if he had been right, if the urgent call he had felt to proclaim the nearness of the one coming in God’s name had been as real as it felt.

And so he sent his closest followers, ones he could trust to ask the tough questions, ones who would not be easily fooled, who would not be swept up and deceived by emotions. John sent them to ask this Jesus of Nazareth “are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” This was no idle question. The very nature of the question reveals that John was willing to consider Jesus a prophet. His disciples asking, “are we to wait for another?” seems a signal that John was at least willing to consider Jesus as being someone who would pick up his mantle of proclaiming the Messiah. But John was still hopeful – “are you the one who was to come?”, is the key question. Is this Jesus the one, or just the latest in a series of popular candidates? Is it possible for John to hope that his prophecy might be fulfilled in his own lifetime? Is it possible for John to have some affirmation, some certainty in his hope?

Jesus answered John in the best way he could. Instead of standing on a pedestal, beating his chest and declaring in a loud proclamation, “yes, I am the one!”, instead of such theatrics Jesus invites

John's disciples to see for themselves, and in doing so provides the only answer that could bring John the hope for which he was searching, and possibly even some joy in the midst of his darkness. Jesus answered John from scripture, pointing to his deeds as fulfillment of scriptural prophecy. His answer echoes the proclamations from Isaiah.

Did the answer satisfy John? We don't know – we can't know. Even with these mighty deeds, did Jesus fit the image of the one John proclaimed as coming? I for one would like to think that the answer John's disciples brought back to the prison brought comfort to John, brought him some assurance, but we cannot know for certain. John would have to make up his own mind as to whether Jesus was the promised one.

While we don't know what John thought about Jesus, we are left in no doubt as to what Jesus thought about John. According to what Jesus went on to tell the crowd, John was no trendy dude, following the fashion of the moment, or being blown where the wind would take him. In Jesus' words, John was not just a prophet, but more than a prophet, one to whom even other prophets pointed, and was indeed the one who held a unique place at the opening of the messianic age. Even so, even as great as John's status is, it pales in comparison before that abundant life that belongs to even the least among us who are Jesus' disciples, who have inherited the kingdom.

But then it's easier for us to become Jesus' disciples, and to have inherited that kingdom, isn't it? To be sure, there are plenty of moments in our lives when, like John, we sit in a darkness not of our own making (and plenty of times when we sit in darkness that is of our own making!), plenty of times when we wonder whether our faith is real, whether Jesus truly is the one, whether God cares about us. If you have never experienced that kind of anxiety, those kind of doubts, then I pray that you will continue to be so blessed, and that you never will experience that darkness. But if you're like the rest of us (like most of us, I would contend), then you can understand from your own experiences the doubt, the uncertainty that John must have felt. Not the harsh, "it's all untrue!", but that more insidious niggling that perhaps it might not be true, or not yet true, that God actually loves the world enough to send his very Son that we might have life, or the even more insidious, "God may love the world, but how can I believe he loves me?"

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?", was the question posed to Jesus by John's disciples. We are blessed in that we know the answer to that question. We have the answer to that question partly from the perspective of John's prophetic ministry. The account of Jesus' ministry opens with the ministry of John, as he bursts forth from the desert. His proclamation of the one to come provides an answer to the first part of the question of "who is this Jesus?". And in a similar way, his direct question, "are you the one?" provides an answer to the second part of the question, "who is this Jesus?". But it is the accounts of the risen Christ that provide the ultimate answer to the question, and so we can know with a certainty that John could not share, that Jesus indeed was, and is, and will be the one for whom the world waited, and for whom we await again.

This is why it is so important in this season of Advent that we look again so closely at John the Baptist. John experienced an incredible sense of waiting with urgency, of hope and expectation that into a troubled world, into troubled lives, God would fulfill His promises uttered through the lips of His prophets and send the anointed one to usher in His Holy Kingdom. The anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ did indeed come to fulfill that promise, not in some thunderous cosmic blast, but unexpectedly in the form of a wee child born in a backwoods village, and laid gently in a manger.

We live in times that can be compared to those of John's day – the world is still full of warfare and strife, with peoples living under the boots of oppressors, with families trying to eke out a living under the threats of terrorism, whether from self-appointed militias or self-gratifying economic empires. The world continues to have more than enough who suffer from being lame, or blind, or

diseased. And yet, unlike John, we know that the one promised has indeed come, and thus have certainty that He will come again, ushering in the Heavenly Kingdom for all time.

It is with that sense of hopeful anticipation of the peace that He will bring when He returns that we are able to celebrate with joy each year at this time the birth of the one we call Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ. It is with grateful appreciation that we acknowledge him as Emmanuel, the incarnation of God's unbounded love, offering the wonders of His Kingdom to all who would accept. We join with all the faithful in affirming that we have been touched by His love and mercy, that we too have been healed, that even in a world beset by problems we experience the peace He has promised, that we hear His unbreakable covenant of love for us, that we see how He has opened our eyes to the wonders of His Kingdom, and how we may step out boldly in our faith, no longer crippled by doubts and insecurity. Let us move toward Christmas Eve and Christmas Day filled with the joy of anticipation, letting the excitement build as we celebrate the answer to the question, "are you the one?" with a loud affirmation that Jesus is indeed Emmanuel, God with us.