

“Go and Tell!”
 Heights, NJ
 December 11, 2016
 Third Sunday in Advent
 Text: Matthew 11:2-11

Island Heights UMC, Island

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Introduction

Joy. It's all around us. It's the currency of the season. You see it on the faces of the children, and you hear it in the music. It's Christmas time! And at Christmas we don't want any bad news. And yet, sometimes, bad news comes. Bad news seems to have no regard for the calendar. Many among us are ill at this time, and even in the hospital. Some among us are grieving, or longing for the company of loved ones lost over the years that we especially miss around the holidays. This pain is real. The joy of Christmas can be acutely tempered with genuine heartache.

John in Trouble

In today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew Jesus gets some bad news about John the Baptist. John is in prison. With his prophetic voice speaking truth to power, he has said one thing too many, and Herod has locked him up, and now he waits for one of three outcomes. As historians have noted about these times, he will either be exonerated, exiled, or executed. John is in trouble. Matthew writes,

When John, in prison, hears what the Messiah is doing, he sends word by his disciples and says to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for

another?" John needs to know because he's sitting in a prison and wondering if all is lost. Was it really supposed to go this way?

Family History

Jesus and John. They go way back. They're family; and there's history. We know from Luke's gospel that when Mary, the mother of Jesus, realizes she is pregnant, she finds out her relative Elizabeth is already six months pregnant. When Elizabeth receives a visit from Mary, as Luke tells it, the baby within her, John, leaps for joy. It was a time of great miracles. What joy there was! Elizabeth was well beyond childbearing years; Mary was a virgin. But John would be born first, and then Jesus. Years later, John would be the first to proclaim, *"Repent! The kingdom of heaven is near."* Jesus would then follow with the same message. John would be arrested first and then destroyed. Jesus would then be taken, and then crucified. Jesus and John; entwined lives, interwoven strands of joy and sorrow. Just like all of us. One moment awash in all the joy that comes with seeing a newborn opening her eyes, and the next being beside someone as he draws his last breath. This is life.

John Will Die

John the Baptist is in prison. He is in serious trouble. He is not getting out. When he was compelled to tell Herod that it is unlawful and wrong to be with his brother Philip's wife Herodias, it was enough for Herod to execute him then, but fearing that the population regarded John as a prophet, he imprisoned him instead. John will stay in prison until Herod's birthday party. At the party Herodias's daughter will dance for the king who will like it so much he will promise her whatever she wants. Her mother will persuade her to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And the wish will be granted at that party. John will die. But for now he sits in that prison, and he has sent messengers to Jesus. And Jesus gives them a message to bring back to John.

Eulogy for John

As they go away, Matthew writes, Jesus begins to speak to the crowds about John.

Last week we heard what John said about Jesus. As wild John cried out in the wilderness and baptized people in the Jordan River he spoke of one who was coming who was greater than him; one whose sandals he wasn't worthy of holding. *"I baptize with water for repentance. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!"*

But now Jesus speaks about John:

"What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

Jesus knows the prophecies of the ancient Jewish Holy Scriptures. And what he says about John is found in both the prophetic writings of Isaiah and Malachi. (Isaiah

40:3; Malachi 3:1) The people can rejoice that Scripture has been fulfilled, in an unexpected way, for certain; but both the forerunner and the Messiah have come. Deliverance is now. But at a costly price. Joy and sorrow intersecting as always.

Jesus offers some final words about John:

“Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

And now we are getting to the heart of things where we find the good news. Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is the topic he speaks most about through his ministry. With the advent of Jesus comes the in-breaking of heaven. What is the reality of Jesus Christ but that everything now changes? Sorrow may last through the night, but joy comes in the morning! Death may have its say today, but tomorrow brings resurrection! That cold wind blowing out there may be stripping every branch of every leaf, but come spring we will see the buds again! All of nature knows this to be true. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ this reality now finds its way to humanity.

Go and Tell

The time is dark for John the Baptist. All seems lost. He wonders if Jesus is the one, or if we are to wait for another. But Jesus has a good news message for John. This is what he tells his messengers:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Go and tell him! It’s happening. All is *not* lost. The shift has begun. Go and tell! This is our mission now in this Advent season. Go and tell that lives are turning around, that hope is being restored, that the poor are being lifted up, the hungry are being fed, go and tell that the sick are being made better, the grieving are being comforted, and the dead are being resurrected to eternal life. Go and tell that even if joy and sorrow remain entwined in this life, joy will always prevail. Pain and suffering may be real, but the reality of Jesus the Christ and the kingdom of heaven is the truth we tell to overcome that pain and suffering. *“Go and tell,”* Jesus says, *“what you hear and see.”* Go and tell. It’s the third Sunday of Advent—the Sunday of joy. Go and tell! Amen.