

Today is the Second Sunday in Advent and today we continue in our sermon series entitled, "What Do You Fear?" Traditionally in Advent we hear about Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist- son of Elizabeth and Zachariah, the priest, whom Pastor Trevor preached about last Sunday. However, we hear about John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Matt. 3:3). And then we're usually reminded that John the Baptist is the one of whom the prophets Isaiah and Malachi (3:1-3) spoke. This morning, we are skipping ahead to the end of John the Baptist's ministry in order to hone in on a moment when deep fear and suffering cause him to perhaps question the impact of his life's work. I'm sure most of us, especially in the latter season of our lives, can relate to questions such as, "Have my efforts really made a difference?" "Is God truly at work?" Before we turn to God's word for us today, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

"Fear is a liar. He will take your breath. Stop you in your steps. Fear, he is a liar. He will rob your rest. Steal your happiness" (Zach Williams). There is truth in these words that were just sung. I would also add "And fear is very real; we face this liar daily." Just as John the Baptist did. We aren't told exactly what John the Baptist was feeling in today's text. However, John is in prison, and it makes me wonder if he's not also in a place of fear and doubt when he asks his disciples to ask Jesus this question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another" (v. 3)? John the Baptist is a prisoner- held under Herod's authority- a different Herod from his father, Zachariah's time- yet still the same context of fear, political rest, and abuse of power over the

oppressed. Think about it. “John the Baptist is [now] cut off from the movement he helped to ignite. The firebrand voice has been silenced. And in its place, we find this question. It’s not just a question. It’s a cry from the edges of despair. John, the prophet who baptized Jesus and had declared him the Lamb of God, is not unsure. In the dim light of his cell, with execution on the horizon, hope flickers low. He does not ask for a miracle. Perhaps he asks whether his whole life- his ministry, message, and risk- meant anything. It’s a question many of us have asked, especially when our efforts for justice and truth feel fruitless. After every protest, election, vigil, or prayer of peace that seems unanswered- Did it matter? Did I get it wrong? Was any of it worth it? This is not doubt born of cynicism. It is the trembling that comes when conviction meets suffering- when the cost of faithfulness has been high, and the fruit appears small. It is what hope sounds like when it’s running thin” (Boyung Lee, Sanctified Art). Do you know that sound? I know there are certainly seasons when I do.

It’s like Matthew’s words in the form of this question leap right off the page and land right onto our laps for us to ask ourselves. “What will we make of this Jesus?” Is he indeed the Messiah? For us? “Living in the midst of Advent, perhaps the question is premature. Along with John we say, ‘Give us more data.’ But when the kingdom comes it is not a matter of more data. We pray, ‘Let your kingdom come.’ Theologian Martin Luther says, ‘God’s kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it also come to us.’” (James Boyce, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). How does Jesus respond to John’s question? “Not

with chastisement. Not with a lecture. He doesn't say, 'John should know better'" (Lee). Instead, Jesus answers him indirectly- with the witness of what was unfolding: "Go, and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (vv. 4-5). "Jesus points not to grand victory, but to quiet signs of transformation. He doesn't hand John certainty- he invites him to perceive God at work. It is a reorientation toward Isaiah's vision: 'I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?' (43:19a). The empire is still intact. Herod still reigns. John will not be released from prison" (Lee). Yet, Jesus insists! God's dream is unfolding. Look again. Listen. Perceive. Jesus tells John's disciples to go and tell him what THEY hear and see. John can't hear and see what's happening on the ground because he's being kept behind bars. He relies on what others are telling him. To judge from John the Baptist's preaching- "Repent, for the kingdom of God draws near!"- the Messiah he expects will come with fire and brimstone, with winnowing fork in hand, to exercise judgment and clean house. However, what John hears from others is about one who brings forgiveness, healing, and mercy. What is most powerful here is not that Jesus performs miracles. "It's that Jesus frames them as evidence of God's reign at work- an alternative kingdom not marked by coercion or fear, but by healing, liberation, and good news for the marginalized. Matthew lifts up Jesus, not as a new Caesar, but as the agent of God's redemptive transformation. Those who perceive the signs understand what kind of Messiah has come" (Lee).

This all makes me think of Bing Crosby singing, "Do You Hear What I Hear?" The lyrics sung, "Said the night wind to the little lamb: "Do you see what I see?" And then in the second verse... "Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy: 'Do you hear what I hear?'" I had no idea before now that this song was originally written by a husband-and-wife songwriting team as a plea for peace during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Perhaps, I digress, a little. All this to ask the question, "Where do we see or hear the Messiah's promising presence at work in the world?" Or "Are we looking or listening for God's presence among us at all?" On Wednesday a gentleman walked in off the streets. He and his two kids were living in a motel and were hungry. We gave him some food, and he replied to a staff member, "We need a microwave to heat this food." What you need to know is that we don't keep microwaves or any other appliances in the Mercy Center. If we did, we'd run out of storage. Right before this man walked in, another gentleman dropped off some donations and among his donations was a microwave. Normally we wouldn't accept the microwave but it somehow got past the staff and they soon discovered it. Just in time for the father with two kids who were in need of a microwave to arrive, ask for and receive it. You cannot make up what we hear and see on a daily basis! Yes, we also have days of fear and doubt mingled in amongst these glimpses of God's upside-down kingdom here on earth. And then I reflect back to John the Baptist. I wish he would have had a prison chaplain who together with him could have pondered and reflected on these questions: "Is our hope solely dependent upon outcomes, tangible proof, or positive change?"

“Can we practice hope even when we don’t see the fruits of our labor?”

“Do we trust God is at work, even if we cannot always see it?”

I read a blog this week where a colleague, who is also a pilot, was talking about a lesson she’s learned in flying that no theology book has ever taught her: “control is an illusion we learn for safety, not for truth” (Cameron Trimble, [link](#)). Our natural instinct in times of crisis is to grab the controls tightly and fight the chaos. However, it is actually the opposite- for the tighter the grip, the more unstable the airplane becomes. “The trick, counterintuitive as it feels, is to loosen the hold. You steady your breathing, ease the pressure, and let the aircraft ride the wind rather than resist it” (Trimble). This metaphor can also be used when speaking about faith. “Many of us were taught a religion of control: a God who rewards order, a world that behaves if we obey [and don’t question or doubt]. But life doesn’t fly that way. Systems break. People falter. Leaders lose their bearings. Somewhere between the altitude of certainty and the descent of doubt, we find ourselves gripping the yoke of our lives with white-knuckled fear. That’s when the deeper wisdom whispers: *Loosen your hold*. Faith, real faith, isn’t about muscling the world into submission. It’s about learning to feel the unseen currents that hold us up even when everything shakes. Jesus called it ‘the peace that passes understanding.’ St. Francis called it ‘perfect joy.’ The mystics called it surrender” (Trimble). I call that gritty and resilient hope and for this reason I really appreciate John the Baptist’s question. It makes him more authentic and relatable.

One more question for the road. “How is God helping us to cultivate a gritty and resilient hope that is not easily diminished by our doubts and fears?- a hope that we can hold onto loosely and trust that God is at work- even in our fear and doubt?” Perhaps we’re helped in some way by the reminder of Jesus’ words to keep listening and looking for God at work in this world- among community- while also remembering that “Hope in the gospel is not grounded in outcomes or visible success. Hope is rooted in perception- in trusting God is still at work, even when systems remain unchanged, even when prophets die behind bars. John’s question echoes across generations. Anyone who has dared to hope in a better world knows this moment. The fear that nothing has changed. The grief that our lives might not have mattered. The silence from the people or institutions we hoped would transform. And still, Jesus affirms John- not in spite of his question, but through it” (Lee). Later in verse 11, we see that Jesus doesn’t see John’s crumbling hope as failure. He names it as part of what makes John faithful. “For hope that trembles is still hope. Even in doubt, John is still a prophet. Even in fear, he is still beloved. Advent does not require us to manufacture hope. It invites us to bring our emptied hope to Jesus, to ask the hard questions, and to listen again for signs of God’s nearness. When we’re running out of hope, it may be the perfect time to ask: ‘What do you see? What do you hear?’ and to [take comfort] and trust that somewhere, even now, something new is springing forth” (Lee). Thanks be to God! Amen.