

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and asked Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴ Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." ⁷ 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? ⁸ What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ 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.' ¹¹ "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.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 11:2-11

12/14/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"What Do You See and Hear?"

Pastor Amy Terhune

A kindergarten teacher carefully lined up four of her "little cherubs" for the annual Christmas program. Each child carried a huge cut out letter. As they stood side by side the letters would spell "star", to go along with the song the children were singing about the Star of Bethlehem. I don't know if the teacher was a little frazzled, or just forgot about the logistics on stage, but a slight mix-up occurred and those present in the church nearly fell out of their pews as the four little performers took their places in reverse, spelling out "RATS," instead of "STAR." [from "Are You the One Who Is to Come?" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Even Bunting writes a sweet little Christmas Story entitled "We Were There" which records the nativity scene from the perspective of critters hiding out in the stable – spiders, cockroaches, and rats, to name a few. And if I understand the story rightly, if shepherds and foreigners were welcome at the manger, then so were the rats. But that's not the point for this morning. Rather, let me suggest that all of us have "star" days and "rats" days. Some seasons in our lives are "star" seasons. But some seasons in our lives are "rats" seasons. John the Baptist was deep into one of those "rats" seasons—no guiding star, just scratching in the dark. Are you the one? Or did I miss something somehow?

You had to know I was going to talk about John the Baptist. We can't get through Advent without him, though he's not the favorite character in any Christmas rendition. I love how Barbara Brow Taylor discusses good ol' John. She writes: "To me, John the Baptist has always seemed like the Doberman pinscher of the Gospel. In the lectionary, John always appears just a few weeks before Christmas, when no one's defenses are up." [from Barbara Brown Taylor, "A Cure for Despair," *Journal for*

Preachers, 1 January 1997, pp. 16–18.] But there he is, snarling his one and only sermon: “Repent, you brood of vipers! Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!” And the people flocked to hear him, delighted in listening in as he read the powers-that-be the riot act! And some thought, ‘hey, maybe something is finally happening. Maybe God is going to move!’

Well yes. In fact, God was already moving, though it passed largely unrecognized at the time.

But by the time Matthew gets to chapter 11, the situation has changed. John’s speaking truth to power has finally gone too far. He may get away with criticizing the Sadducees and even the High Priest, but he’ll not get away with condemning the actions of the King, who killed off his brother and married his brother’s wife. John is landed in prison—on death row, you might say—and execution is only a matter of time. Which may explain why the same man who encountered Jesus and cried out, ‘This is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. I’m not worthy to carry his sandals!’ is now sending emissaries to ask: “Are you the one, or should we look for another?”

John B. Jamison puts it this way: “John said that he had come to baptize with water, and that the one following him would baptize with “fire from heaven.” So where was the fire? So far, there wasn’t even smoke. So far, the Pharisees and Sadducees were still in charge of the faith, and Rome was still in charge of the government. In fact, instead of bringing in the kingdom, Jesus had kept pretty quiet up north while John got himself arrested and thrown into one of Herod’s dungeons on a mountaintop by the Dead Sea. That might make a person ask some questions. Is this any way for a Messiah to behave?” [from John B. Jamison, *Time’s Up!*, CSS Publishing Company, appearing on illustrations for Advent III, yr A, www.Sermons.com.]

That gets to the heart of it. When John preached in the wilderness, he was sure of himself, his message, his God. No problem. But now he’s confined to four walls in the dungeons of civilization, and he finds his soul in a wilderness without landmarks anywhere in his range of vision! In his disillusionment, we hear the desperate question “Are you the one, because quite frankly, I don’t see it, Jesus!” Jamison concludes: “At least I hope that’s what happened with John. If John the Baptist, as high up as he ranked, still had some questions, maybe there is room for me and mine.” [ibed.]

To which I would say: yes, there’s room. And not only is there room, there is necessity. Sooner or later, serious people of faith must confront that question: Are you the one? It’s especially poignant at Advent, when we’re preaching about the Kingdom yet to be—when we’re talking about swords beaten into plowshares and light shining in the darkness. Are you the one, Jesus, because it really is difficult to see it in today’s world! Show me the Kingdom of God on the streets of Saginaw. Show me the Kingdom of God in the mountains of Syria and Afghanistan. Show me the Kingdom of God in the arsenals of North Korea! Show me the Kingdom of God in the bombed out neighborhoods of Ukraine and the Gaza strip. Show me the kingdom of God in South Sudan right now.

“Annie Dillard tells of the pastor whose pulpit prayer included some wonderful petitions for the betterment of life in this world. Then, before signing off, he included these words: “But you know, O God, that we ask for these same things Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. So we confess to you our discouragement that so little progress is made.” Said Annie: “His prayer was so painfully honest that I knew I had finally found a preacher who knows God.”

“Frankly, I do not know why....if God is truly in charge....that things do not go better or happen faster. But when John raised a similar question to Jesus ("If you're the one, tell us what we're missing"), Jesus said: "Look again. Look closer." [2 ¶s from “Advent and the Chicago Cubs” by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.]

There are people—can you see them—who are modeling another way. They’re ex-convicts and teachers and grandmothers and assembly-line-workers and scientists and janitors. Look again. Look closer.

And then a cryptic statement: blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me—which is better translated: blessed is the one who doesn’t get tripped up because I’m not what they expected.

And he’s not what we expect, is he? We would still rather have a savior that silences enemies and defeats armies and revives the economy and might be nice to have a beer with. Really. But that’s not Jesus. I suspect that over a beer, Jesus would look at me with piercing eyes and say “let’s talk about you, really talk about you,” which is the last thing most of us want, honestly. At least, not the way he wants to talk – about things that need to change and habits that need to break and attitudes that need adjustment. And Jesus doesn’t want to talk about all that because he’s a jerk. He wants to talk about it because he loves us; because he’s in the business of transforming hearts and lives. That’s what Jesus does. Jesus builds the kingdom of God among us by lovingly building us into faithful followers. It’s meaningful. It’s life-changing in a good way. But it’s not easy.

John wants to know, “Are you the one, or should we look for another?” In his disillusionment, John is not seeing what he thought he would. Which strikes me as interesting, since I find myself inclined to see exactly what I think will. If I look for evil, for the bad stuff, for reasons to be anxious, angry, upset, and cynical, I’ll find them. It’s not hard at all. But if I look for good, for the beautiful stuff, for reasons to find peace, joy, love, hope, I can find them, too. It’s maybe a little more challenging, but far from impossible. What do *you* see and hear? What are you looking for? John didn’t see it at first because he was looking for something else. And when those illusions and mirages of the brain were questioned, and Jesus challenged John (and us) to “look again, look closer”, then things came into focus.

“Are you the one, or should we look for another?” “Which,” writes Bill Ritter, “sounds like a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ question if I ever heard one. Except that Jesus, upon hearing it, answers neither ‘yes’ nor ‘no’. Instead, he says: "Go and tell John what you see and hear: Blind people seeing. Lame people walking. Deaf people hearing. Dead people reviving. And poor people hearing news that, for a change, doesn't depress the daylights out of them.

“Which, you could say, is no proof of Messiahship that you ever heard. Unless, that is, you are...or understand yourself to be in some way ... blind... lame... deaf... poor... or dead. In which case, I think you'd probably be impressed. Maybe even convinced. [2 ¶s adapted slightly from “On Preaching to a Bunch of Later Day Baptists” by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.]

Amen.