

Sermon Outline
December 11, 2016

Third Sunday of Advent, Year A
(Matthew 11: 2 - 11)

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, last Sunday, Bruce Pegg shared with us the continuing message of this time of Advent; of anticipation of new life among us.

And, if we backtrack a bit and recall his message, we first encountered John the Baptist in an earlier point on his spiritual journey. A reminder from John to the people of Israel to “make your paths straight”, and prepare the way of the Lord.

It would be a good substitution of metaphor to think of driving a deluxe new car which included an in-dash video monitor for a GPS, a global positioning system. The older style method of looking at a roadmap is a blase thing of the past. Now, if you want to drive to a different restaurant, just plot in the address and the car does the rest. The voice from the speaker tells you to turn right here, turn left there. But, if you go the wrong way, you are literally told that you are “off course” and the new directions spoken through the stereo speakers put you back on course to your destination.

In terms of our spiritual journeys, I suppose there are times we wish that we could hear God plainly and decisively in that way...and there are other times we wish that the message was not as clear.

For thousands of years, the Jewish people had been praying for a Messiah, a deliverer who would conquer their enemies and establish a kingdom of righteousness and might. Their deliverer would be powerful, a warrior and a king, and through his power the Jews would again reign in peace and prosperity.

John the Baptist had also been praying for and preparing for the Messiah his whole life, doing this with a harsh criticism of the ruling religious establishment. His idea of Jesus was, then, one of a warrior type, someone like John who would preach fire and brimstone. Telling Israel to repent and return on course in relationship with God; telling Israel to turn left on Main Street, giving them specific directions. Jesus is first, and follow him in preparation for the time of judgment.

But, you know? Sometimes things just do not go in the direction...continue on the course that seems so right, so natural. For example, just the other day, while driving around, I noticed a small flock of a dozen or so Canada geese in flight in their “V” formation. But they were going the wrong way.

They were flying north....not south like they are supposed to. I had noticed that several times earlier the week before....several isolated flocks of geese doing the same thing....in flight east or west or wherever, but not south. What happened to that certainty?

We hear that change in John the Baptist's story, from last week to this. They are different because they come from different places in John's faith journey.

This time, John is in prison. He is discouraged and in doubt. Perhaps he is also disappointed because his expectations of the Messiah do not seem to be fulfilled by Jesus. The final era of history has started and the coming of the Kingdom was announced. Last time, John probably thought, "Here he is. Now's the time. It's really going to happen, and I can't wait!" And this time, John asks, "Why am I in prison? Where is the final judgment? Why is there still foreign tyranny and oppression?" "Why are not the geese flying south for the winter?"

So, having his doubts, he sends messengers to ask Jesus: "Are you the one ...?"

That is sort of like the question heard from the back seat, "Are we there yet?"

It is human nature to want certainty and conclusion. We somehow think and live in terms of goals, of bottom lines, of destinations. We seek directions so we can get to that restaurant, to that point. I want the geese to fly south because, in my mind, that is what they do this time of year. We become "off course" when there are no answers to questions or, worse yet, the answers we hear are square pegs to the round holes of our understanding.

When John asks the question through messengers, Jesus does not simply say **YES**. Instead, he points John to the signs of the Kingdom. Echoing Isaiah, he points out that the blind, the deaf, the lame and the lepers are being healed and good news is given to the poor.

Then, "go and tell...what you hear and see."

Jesus told John then...and tells us now...that it's not about the destination ("south")...it is all about the journey, the process. It is about life, and what we do with it.

When we are disappointed, perhaps it is because we are not looking for the signs of the Kingdom that are all around us. Instead of the warrior king, along comes Jesus, a poor, solo carpenter with questionable friends, claiming to be the long-awaited Messiah who has come to set up a very different kind of kingdom.

There's a cute little story of a woman who was searching for the perfect birthday card for her husband a few years ago and she came across a promising one. On the outside it read: "Sweetheart, you're the answer to my prayers." Then she turned to the inside, which said: "You are not what I prayed for exactly, but apparently you are the answer."

It is not enough to repent, as the Baptist commanded. Jesus was aware that even though his messiahship was not what was expected, what he was doing would speak for itself.

It is the transformation of John the Baptist that we see today. As he sat in his prison cell, stripped of all the things we think are necessary for life, he discovered the one most important thing: **hope**. John saw the hope that the Messiah had come to set up an eternal kingdom, a kingdom of

justice and mercy, compassion and healing.

A kingdom for all people.

The answer for the question is in the doing, not in the saying or the being. A kingdom of justice and mercy and compassion and healing. Those are adjectives of action. In other words, Jesus says, "Don't wait around. Get out and get busy." Walking the walk, we now see, is far more difficult than talking the talk. No, it wasn't exactly what John the Baptist was praying for. But like the card read, it was apparently the answer....and so much more than that.

As we share the stories of how Jesus brings hope and life to those who are hurting, our hearers will encounter God's love and grace and their lives will be changed. As we ourselves continue in our lifetime journeys with God, our own hurts will be healed and nurtured, and our own lives will be changed.

May we learn to be faithful and joyful in our life journey with God...no matter in what direction we fly...and during this Advent season, may we all discover the same hope while we actively anticipate the coming of the Anointed One of God...all in the loving name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.