

Matthew 11:2-11, December 11, 2022, 3rd Sunday of Advent

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Oh holy one, enliven my words with your Spirit. Open our hearts to your presence. Amen.

As we journey through the season of Advent, we are invited to slow down and to pay attention. To listen and to look for God around us. In this season especially, we are invited to notice. What do you see and hear? Where is God? Where is God needed, in our own lives, and in our global community?

I look around and I see God in many loving relationships. I marvel at the antics of my sweet toddler who just discovered the word and the concept of “why?” I see that of God in her joy. I see God present in the generosity of spirit as we support those in need with time and resources. I encounter God in beauty.

And yet, the war in Ukraine persists. We mourn the shooting in Colorado Springs, another tragedy rooted in intolerance and hate. Our personal griefs that we may have pushed aside and contained, often resurface unbidden this time of year. Where is God in these things?

So, as we seek God and that of God in the world around us, where do we land? Our experiences of God can be complex, even contradictory. We see God in the good around us, and then have to deal with those rotten outliers in our data set.

When we look around and ask, where is God? We are also asking, who is God? And for people of faith, this question is also: who am I?

As we bring these questions to our passage today, we are in good company with none other than John the Baptist, who is also pulled between experiences of trust and of doubt.

As context, John and Jesus have shared much together, most especially the tender moment of Jesus' baptism. John lowers Jesus into the river Jordan and as Jesus reemerges, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove. The voice of God is heard, proclaiming: "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

This is a sacred moment. A moment with layers of meaning. It is sacramental - the meeting of the physical and the spiritual in the water of baptism. It is a nexus on the timeline of salvation history, a transition between what will be and what now is, as Jesus begins his public ministry. And it is the moment of connection between prophet and messiah. John has been faithfully preparing the way for the one who is to come, and here he is, before him, asking to be baptized. Imagine what this moment of baptizing Jesus must have been like for John! Imagine hearing the very voice of God speaking of Jesus: "this is my son, the beloved." It is hard to conceive of a more direct confirmation of faith in Christ as the messiah, then the voice of God speaking it in your hearing.

And now, we jump forward from Jesus' baptism in Mark 3 to today's gospel in Mark 11. The situation has changed. John is in prison. Herod's power is growing. And John is doubting. As we all do, when circumstances are dire. John asks his followers to find Jesus and say: "are you really the one to come? Or should we wait for another?" I don't think it is a modern imposition to find that question incredibly sassy. It is certainly frank, perhaps even angry. This is John, the man of deep faith, the prophet even before his birth, as he leapt in Elizabeth's womb in the presence of pregnant Mary. John, who has dedicated his life to preparing the way for Christ and even had divine confirmation of Jesus' identity as he baptized him in the Jordan. And now, he is asking: "Are you really the one to come, Jesus? Or should I wait for another?" Because from where I sit in prison, it doesn't seem like the Kingdom of God is "at hand."

And Jesus' response to John's emissaries is: go and tell John what you hear and see. You see the power of the Roman empire, but look deeper. Look between the cracks. Herod's power may be growing, but the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed. My redemption is sprouting up all over the place, when you have eyes to see.

"What do you see and hear?", Jesus asks. I think this is also an invitation to us today. Though our experiences are complex, we ought not distrust them as a source of revelation. God is not just above but also within all things, especially the day to day. To be a person of faith is to become more comfortable with paradox, with a God who is here, and who is not yet here enough. And, like John, we will have experiences of both the abundance of what is already and the pain of longing for what is to come.

Jesus ends our passage with a generous affirmation of doubting John. Jesus says: "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." I find this to be deeply encouraging. Even in John's dark moment of accusation, Jesus feels tenderly toward him. And significantly, even though he is in a moment of doubt, he is still affirmed as one of great faith. John's faith can hold his doubt, and so I believe, our faith can hold our doubts.

I have often reflected: what is the tone of the season of Advent? Is it a season of joyful anticipation? Is it a season of somber preparation? My conclusion is: Yes! I have come to find advent as a season that holds both joy and longing, and for that to be a great gift. We pray "o come o come emmanuel" and find resonance in heartfelt prayer that the one who is already Emmanuel "God with us" to come, and be closer still. Advent is a season of a light in the darkness, and we are invited to dwell in both as we await the coming of Christ.

I'll close by sharing a portion of a blessing "for light" by John O'Donouhe, which speaks to me of faith and doubt, light and darkness, and the season of the Advent. He says:

*Light cannot see inside things.
That is what the dark is for:
Minding the interior,
Nurturing the draw of growth
Through places where death
In its own way turns into life.*

*The weight of shadows
holds the layers of truth.
May we never place our trust
In minds claimed by empty light,
Where one-sided certainties
Are driven by false desire.*

*“When we come to search for God,
Let us first be robed in night,
(to) put on the mind of morning
To feel the rush of light
Spread slowly inside
The color and stillness
Of a found world.” (end quote)*

This Advent, we are invited to pay attention, to look and see where God is and where God is needed. We need not put our experiences of light and dark in competition, but rather, hold them both, denying none, and welcoming all as a part of the journey of faith. Most especially, this season we remember that all we experience is in the context of an unfolding love, a bigger story, a new beginning for which we are waiting expectantly.