

Text: Matthew 11:2-11

Date: 11th December 2022

Fellowship@10

Introduction

First, on this Third Sunday of Advent I want you to invite you to accompany me on a journey. A journey of imagination.

Is that alright?

At certain points of my reflection, I want us to imagine together how might John feel or what John might be thinking?

Are you ready?

A straightforward, common-sense reading of Matthew 11 would tell us that John the Baptist, unhappily rotting away in prison, has been getting reports about the work of Jesus? Maybe reports that struck him as being not nearly as interesting or dramatic as what he had hoped for. Having flagged Jesus as the Coming One, as the Messiah, John begins to wonder if he had made one of the biggest mistakes in history. And so, he dispatches a delegation of his own followers who had visited him one day to ask Jesus an explosive question borne of doubt: *“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else? You know, someone **better?**”*

Are you the one?

Maybe a question cried out in desperation. Or maybe a question cried out in despair.

Are you the one?

Remember John was in prison, waiting for his execution. He was probably thinking about the young prophet he had once baptised at the Jordan River, the one he believed to be the anointed saviour from God. That day at the river seemed like another lifetime now.

Are you the one?

Maybe John was confused. His ministry of justice and repentance was being cut short. His life was about to come to a violent end. Why? Because he had called out King Herod and Queen Herodias for their corruption. John was doing God's work, doing what God had called him to do. And this is how it's going to end?

IMAGINE HOW JOHN MIGHT BE FEELING

Maybe John's question sent to Jesus is born out of frustration or pain, or doubt. **"Jesus, are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"** Are you really the Messiah? Are you the real deal? Or was I wrong that day at the Jordan River when I declared you to be the anointed of God? I suspect sometimes John's question issues forth from our mouths as well.

If you follow the news about our indigenous peoples, the latest report on closing the gap, things are looking grim – very few improvements. If you follow the news about climate change, it isn't looking too good. If you follow the news about refugees and asylum seekers trying to find safety, trying to find a country to settle the situation is not getting better. It's getting worse.

So, you may be able to relate to John the Baptist's desperate question. It's a crisis of faith. I have many crises of faith over the years. There are many moments of doubts.

Is he the one?

Can anyone blame John for doubting? He has reached the end of his rope and the loss his hope. The river is dried up, says John. My ministry for God has landed me in prison. Jesus I was willing to pave the way for you and what do I get? I will be beheaded.

Are you worth it, Jesus?

Sometimes I hear that question with people who advocate for environmental issues, for refugees, for women's rights, for children's safety, for the jobless, for the rights of the First Peoples. They do this work because they feel called by God, compelled by their faith to call out corruption, to minister to the least of these. But when things are getting worse, not better, it can make you question everything. You question your faith, your purpose in life, the goodness of humanity, and the goodness of God or even the existence of God. Truth be told I can understand why some people decide to give up on God, or their faith.

NOW I WANT YOU TO IMAGINE WITH ME.

Imagine when John's disciples stood before Jesus with the message they had delivered from John.

What did Jesus feel?

First, I think he could feel the anguish in John's question. It's the anguish felt when the cause has been lost, when the last of the species has died, when the child lies lifeless and dead under the shiny foil blanket. Or when your 20-year-old daughter died suddenly. Or when your wife was killed by a drunkard man driving his car. God, I thought you are the protector, the saviour, the omnipresent, the Messiah?

"Jesus, are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

I imagine at that moment Jesus perhaps reaching for a piece of paper, writing something in very neat, careful handwriting, folding it up and handing it to John's disciples to take back

and slip between the iron bars of the prison cell. We might imagine John seeing that paper flutter down like a butterfly onto the cold dirt floor. He picks it up and unfolds the paper, his fingers trembling. On that piece of paper is written one simple thing. **Isaiah 35:5-6.**

Isaiah 35:5-6?

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened; ⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.”

Can you imagine what John would have done when he recalled Isaiah 35:5-6? A smile like sunshine would have shone forth from his face. And how he would have felt? His eyes would have filled and then overflowed with tears, like . . . streams in the desert. Because he would have known the answer encoded in that slip of paper. And that answer gave him so much peace, such a profound feeling of wellbeing and trust in the goodness of God. And nothing else mattered. Not the prison bars. Not the cold dirt floor. Not the king’s armed guards. Not the sword they carried to violently end his life.

NOW I NEED YOU TO IMAGINE AGAIN.

This is not going to be easy. Imagine the scene later that day – Queen Herodias hoping to see a look of terror when she opened the lid on that silver platter. How shocked, how pierced her heart would be to see not fear, but a smile of joy frozen on that lifeless face looking up at her. It was a smile that says *“Oh Herodias, Oh King Herod. The joke is on you. I have the last laugh. God has the last laugh. For I have obtained joy and gladness. My sorrow and sighing have just faded away.”*

Or Paul’s words: *Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor*

depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Advent is a time of expectation. It is a time of waiting for the coming of the Saviour into the world. And what happens when he comes? He comes among us in his Word and through the Spirit to stir us up to get involved in his ministry among those who are left out, on the margins of society, and who are in need.

On this third Sunday of Advent, I believe John's question – Are you the one? Is also our question. Is this a messiah that John or we can live with? Do we really like a God who insists on coming to forgive, to show mercy, to call even the unrighteous to repentance?

“Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for another?” John asks. “Believe what you see,” Jesus answers. And rejoice, because the kin-dom of heaven that you have been waiting for is here *now*. **Amen**