

The 3rd Sunday of Advent: Holy Trinity Church: December 11, 2016

Matthew 11: 2-11: *May Christ Be Born In You*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

In 1926, the United States Government declared 150,000 patented models of old inventions obsolete and placed them on the auction block for sale.

Prospective buyers and on-lookers laughed as item after item was put up for bid; such as a "bed-bug buster" or an "illuminated cat" that was designed to scare away mice. Then there was a device to prevent snoring. It consisted of a trumpet that reached from the mouth to the ear; and was designed to awaken the snorer and not the neighbors. And then there was the adjustable pulpit that could be raised or lowered according to the height of the preacher. I would have bought that. Needless to say, this auction of old patent models was worth at least 150,000 laughs; but if we would look into this situation a little deeper, we would discover that these 150,000 old patent models also represent 150,000 broken dreams. They represented a mountain of disappointments. It

may seem inappropriate to talk about broken dreams and disappointments this close to Christmas. After all, this is the season to be jolly. But it's not jolly for everybody, is it? For those who have lost loved ones this is the loneliest time of the year. And in a world that glorifies materialism, those who are struggling financially may find it to be most disappointing.

Our friend John the Baptist knew about disappointment. John is in prison now and he's looking for a sign. He's looking for a sign that the long-awaited Messiah has really arrived. That's ironic, don't you think? John the Baptist is the one who first proclaimed his coming. But much has happened to John since we last saw him preaching, and baptizing people in the Jordan River, living in wilderness, and screaming for all those who came out to see him to repent. But now, sitting in prison, John's heart is cast down.

You remember John's message was, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*" This message burned in John's soul. John wasn't afraid to proclaim his message to religious leaders and royalty alike. He wasn't even afraid to proclaim it to King Herod himself. That was why he was in jail.

This was not the King Herod who was the ruler at the time of the birth of Jesus; this was his son, Herod Antipas, who turned out to be worse than his father. Herod Antipas seduced and later married his brother's wife, but first he killed his brother. The nation was in shock. John the Baptist condemned

the king's behavior and was thrown in prison. While in prison John realized that his career as a prophet would soon come to an end. There was one thing that John wanted to know before he died. John wanted to know beyond a shadow of a doubt if Jesus was really the Messiah.

My sisters and brothers, can you blame him? He had given everything he had including, in a matter of days, his very life. He wanted to know, has it all been in vain? Is it all an illusion, a dream? In the wilderness John had believed Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, but in the face of certain death he has some doubts. John wanted to know for sure. So he sent some of his followers to find Jesus and ask him, "*Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?*"

You see, John the Baptist found himself in a disappointing and disheartening predicament. Things were not working out like he had expected. Sometimes that happens. Sometimes disappointment happens, particularly at Christmas. This is not an easy time of year. This was John's December. He was hurting in Herod's prison. He was hurting physically and he was hurting emotionally. He was gripped with disappointment. John was disappointed because he had different expectations of what a Messiah would do. We cannot forget John was a product of his time. He expected the same kind of Messiah everyone else expected. John expected a 'Royal Messiah' a warrior king who would rise up

and drive out the despised Romans, re-consecrate their Holy Land and establish the Kingdom of God. While languishing in prison John must have wondered why more wasn't happening. What's he waiting for? He must have thought to himself time and time again. Why doesn't Jesus drive the Roman dogs out? He was disappointed because of his faulty expectations.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, sometimes we are disappointed, not because what we receive is bad, but because we have faulty expectations. There are people in this church who feel that life has somehow cheated them, but I can guarantee you that if you lost everything you have right now, and then suddenly had it all restored, you would be exceedingly grateful. The problem is not what we have, but our expectations. John the Baptist expected the Messiah to come by storm, but nothing much seemed to be happening. It was not Jesus who was at fault, but John's expectations. That is the first reason John the Baptist was gripped by disappointment.

The second reason John was disappointed, he was looking for all the wrong signs. The followers of John the Baptist caught up with Jesus. They asked Jesus John's question, *"Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"* Jesus answered, *"Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."* The day of the Lord

had arrived. There was evidence that God's kingdom had begun. "Just look around," Jesus told John's followers, "to see what is happening." Those weren't the signs John was looking for. He was looking for something more dramatic. He was looking for thunder and lightning and conquest and restoration.

I always enjoyed Charles Kuralt's stories about his travels across the United States. He did a story about what he found that appeared to look like a Christmas tree growing in the most unlikely place in the Rockies. Kuralt notes, "Trees need good soil and good weather and up here there's no soil and terrible weather." Nothing can live up here, and certainly not trees. That's why the tree is a kind of miracle." On a barren stretch of U.S. 50, without another tree in sight, grows this Juniper tree. "Nobody remembers who put the first Christmas ornament on it, maybe some whimsical motorist of years ago. From that day to this, the tree has been redecorated each year. Nobody knows who does it. But each year by Christmas Day, the tree has become a Christmas tree. Kuralt goes on to say, "The tree, which has no business growing here at all has survived against all the odds." People who live miles away in all directions know and love the tree. Just looking at it makes you think about how unexpected life on earth can be. The tree is so lonely and so brave that it seems to offer courage and a message to those who pass by it." It

is the Christmas message: that there is life and hope even in a rough and harsh world." Isaiah wrote, "*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom.*"

But you see my sisters and brothers in Christ; those are not the kinds of signs that impress people. We want greatness. We want it big and we want it loud.

We want it spectacular. Think of the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games. That's not God's way. God chooses to work in the little insignificant places of life like a manger, like a carpenter's shop, like a cross on a hill.

The third reason John was disappointed was that he didn't give God time.

John wanted action now! We can understand that, can't we, in light of his current situation? But God takes God's own sweet time. After all, God has been working on this world for hundreds of millions of years. But God's purpose is just as sure and God's plan is just as unstoppable.

One Christmas, there was a young boy who wanted a pony more than anything else in the whole world. He prayed and he hoped he would get a pony. His little sisters tried to comfort him by reminding him that Christmas was coming, but Christmas was always coming and grownups were always talking about it, asking you what you wanted. His parents played games with him by asking him, what do you want for Christmas? "All I want is a pony," he told them. "If I can't have a pony, give me nothing, absolutely nothing."

Christmas Day arrived and the children were up at the crack of dawn. At first they were overwhelmed by all the presents. His sisters knelt down, each by her pile of gifts; squealing with delight, till they looked up and saw their brother standing there in his pajamas with nothing, absolutely nothing. The young boy didn't get the pony he wanted more than anything else for Christmas. His sisters joined him in his agony, running back to their bedrooms crying. He refused to eat anything. He was too upset. He went out to the stable, and his mother came out to comfort him. He noticed his father watching him from a window for a couple of hours. This was his worst Christmas ever, not one present. Then the boy saw a man riding a pony down the street, a pony with a brand new saddle, and it was a boy's saddle. The man was reading the numbers on the houses. He looked at the door of the boy's house and passed by. Well, that was the last straw. The boy flung himself on the ground and began crying uncontrollably. "Hey, kid," the stranger asked, "IS this 27 Farm Street?" "Yes," he blubbered through his tears. "Well," he said, "then this is your horse. I've been looking all over for you." The man gave the boy his excuses for being so late, but the boy never heard them. He could hardly wait. Before too long he was riding down Farm Street on his pony. To this day he still doesn't know if that was his best Christmas or his worst. You see, the pony was always coming. It was the boy's impatience and uncertainty that

drove him to the brink of despair.

My brothers and sisters, we have all been there haven't we? I have been there.

I have often wondered why God waited 30 years to ordain me a priest at the

age of 56 and not 26. I have learned that God doesn't work according to our

time schedule. I have learned that sometimes God doesn't appear to be

working at all. But God is. Certainly, God wasn't working according to John

the Baptist's timetable. But God was working. The fact that we celebrate the

life of John the Baptist two thousand years later is proof that God was

working.

So, how about you? Where do you find the challenges in your life during this

Season of waiting during this Season of Advent? Is your life filled with

disappointments because you have unrealistic expectations? Are, you looking

in all the wrong places to find your happiness? Have you learned to wait upon

the Lord? My sisters and brothers, Bethlehem teaches us about expectations.

Bethlehem teaches us about signs. Bethlehem teaches us about patience.

Bethlehem teaches us that God begins with a simple baby and very humble

surroundings and God works slowly, for sure. But God is at work. Do not lose

hope. Instead open your hearts to the Joy of Advent and Christmas and

Christ will be born in you. AMEN.