

**The Third Sunday of Advent: Holy Trinity Church: December 11, 2022**

**Matthew 11: 2-11: *God is at work. Let us not lose hope. Joy to the World.***

***The Lord is come***

**Preached**

**By**

**The Rev. John E. Higginbotham+**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!**

**My sisters and brothers in Christ, 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.**

**Last Sunday, I spoke to you about John the Baptist. John saw himself as, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Screaming at the top of his lungs, repent, "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." John was to herald the coming of the Messiah to people who claimed they were awaiting the Messiah, but who like us, only wanted the Messiah to come on their terms.**

**This Sunday, I will speak about John's disappointment. This weekend, the Gospel from Matthew 11: 2-11, John is in prison now and he's looking for a sign " 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 wilderness, and now his heart is cast down.**

**You'll 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 the religious leaders and royalty alike. He wasn't even afraid to proclaim it to King Herod himself. That was why John 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. Now King Herod Antipas seduced and later married his brother's wife, but first he killed his brother, Philip. The nation was in shock. The Baptist condemned the king's behavior and John was placed in prison. While in prison John realized that his career as a prophet would soon be ended. His life would be over as well.**

**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. 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. He 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 my sisters and brothers in Christ, John the Baptist found himself in a disappointing and disheartening predicament. Things were not working out like he had expected. Sometimes that happens to all of us and then disappointment sets in. It was December for John the Baptist. He was hurting in Herod's prison. He was hurting physically and emotionally. John was gripped with disappointment. John was Disappointed, first of all, because he had different expectations of what a Messiah would do. John was a product of his time. He expected the same kind of Messiah everyone else expected ” one who would drive out the hated Romans and establish the Kingdom of God. While languishing in prison John must have wondered why more was not happening. What's Jesus waiting for? He must have thought to himself time and time again. Why doesn't he drive the Roman dogs out of their Holy Land? He was disappointed because of his faulty expectations.**

**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 he was gripped by disappointment.**

**My brothers and sisters in Christ, the second reason John was disappointed was that 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 receives 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."**

Centuries before, there was a prophet named Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied about what would take place when the Messiah would arrive. Isaiah said, "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer." Those weren't the signs John was looking for. He was looking for something more dramatic. He was looking for thunder and lightning. He was looking for a war to kick the Romans out of their land and make it holy once again.

I loved the stories of Charles Kuralt in his travels across the United States and found what looked like a Christmas tree growing in the most unlikely place in the Rockies. He said, "Trees need good soil and good weather and up here there's no soil and terrible weather," Kuralt notes. "Nothing can live up here and certainly not trees. That's why the tree is a kind of miracle." On a barren stretch of Highway U.S. 50, without another tree in sight, grows this Juniper tree. "Nobody remembers who put the first Christmas ornament on it" 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. "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 to those who pass it ” and a message. My sister and brothers, this is the Christmas message: that there is life and hope even in a rough world." Isaiah wrote, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom."

But you see, those are not the kinds of signs that impress people. We want greatness writ large. That is not God's way. God chooses to work in the little insignificant places of life just like a manger, a carpenter's shop and a cross.

**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 his 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 His plan is just as unstoppable.

A story, about a man name Lenny reminisced about a time when he was young boy one Christmas while growing up when he wanted a pony more than anything. He prayed and hoped he would get a pony," he said. "My good little sisters to comfort me remarked that Christmas was coming, but Christmas was always coming, and grown-ups were always talking about it, asking you what you wanted." His parents played games with him, asking him what he wanted for Christmas. "All I want is a pony," he told them. "If I can't have a

pony, give me nothing, nothing at all." Christmas Day arrived, and the children were up at 6:00 a.m. At first, they were overwhelmed by all the presents. "His sisters had knelt down, each by her pile of gifts; they were squealing with delight, until they looked up and saw Lenny standing there in his pajamas with nothing. Nothing at all." Lenny 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, Lenny noticed 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 of the houses. "Lenny looked out their door and saw the rider just passed by," Lenny remembered. That was the last straw. He flung himself on the ground and began crying uncontrollably. "Hey, kid," the stranger asked, "do you know a boy named Lennie?" "Yes," he is sputtering through tears, "that's me." "Well," he said, "then this is your horse. I've been looking all over for you." The man told Lennie his excuses for being so late, but the boy never heard them. "I could scarcely wait." Before too long Lenny was riding down the street on his pony. To this day he still doesn't know if that was his

best Christmas or his worst. You see my sisters and brothers, , the pony was always coming. It was Lennie's impatience and uncertainty that drove him to the brink of despair.

I've been there, haven't you? God doesn't work according to our time schedule, but according to His. And sometimes God doesn't appear to be working at all. But God is. God is. Certainly, he 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? Think about this, 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?

Here is the challenge for this third Sunday of Advent and one more Christmas story. The kindergarten teacher carefully lined up four little "cherubs" for the annual Christmas Pageant. Each carried a huge cut out letter. As they stood side by side the letters would spell "star." 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. They spelled out "rats, and not star. That's what happens when you get your priorities out of order.

**Bethlehem teaches us about expectations. Bethlehem teaches us about signs.**

**Bethlehem teaches us about patience. God begins with a simple baby lying in a manger and in very humble surroundings and God works slowly, but surely.**

**But God is at work. Let us not lose hope. Joy to the world, the Lord is come.**

**AMEN!**