

Advent Three: Expecting God's Redemption – Ben Wayman

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

John the Baptist makes me uncomfortable. I don't know if it's his steady diet of locusts. Or his camel hair clothes. Maybe it's his hangout spot in the desert. Or his message of impending judgment. Probably, it's a nice mixture of all of it.

I admit that a lot can be said about John the Baptist. He was no sucker for the status quo. He preached repentance. He confronted both religious and political rulers (which is what got him thrown in prison). And he baptized Jesus. Not a shabby list of credentials, clearly.

And, I'm willing to consider that my discomfort with John is a shortcoming on my part. I like a good burger. I like cotton t-shirts. I don't care much for camping. And I'd rather not talk about hell.

But the reason why I'm not convinced that my discomfort with John is a serious problem is that it's not clear to me that John got Jesus right. Jesus, after all, seems quite different from John. While John did prepare the way of the Lord, he doesn't seem to be able to follow the way of the Lord all the way through. He has confession and repentance down pat; but he seems to miss out on the joy of forgiveness and the liberation it brings. John, it seems to me, would be the kind of guy who would want to begin and end Morning Prayer with the Confession of sin, and leave everything else out.

I expect I'll probably hear from some of you after the service that I've been too hard on John, and you may be right. But I want to be clear that I don't mean for my assessment of John to imply in any way my evaluation of the Old Testament. In fact, I mean just the opposite. And I think this is why Jesus, in our Gospel lesson today, only gives John one thumb up.

Jesus confirms that John was worth going out in the wilderness to see. John was not shaken by the bullying of the Pharisees or Sadducees. He was not deterred by Herod or his political muscle. John didn't give in to cushy palace life, but kept a prophetic distance. John, Jesus tells us, was the promised one who prepared the way of the Lord. One thumb up.

But the problem with John is his reading of scripture. John's reading is selective and he misses a critical part. Our Old Testament lesson today is from the prophet Isaiah, because this is exactly what Jesus had in mind when he responds to John's disciples. But Isaiah is not what John seemed to have in mind when he preached repentance. Last week we saw John, the mesmerizing desert prophet, confidently announce Jesus as the Messiah. But this week we see him in prison and confused about Jesus.

John was right to see that God was calling the world to repentance. But, this was only part of what Jesus was up to, and it certainly was not his main mission. Walter Brueggemann, one of my favorite readers of the Bible, explains John's problem this way, "To a fierce denouncer of the sins of the people, the Messiah's primary task must be to carry out the final judgment, to see that the ax is laid to the root of the tree and to burn every tree that does not bear fruit (3:10-12). What sort of Messiah could Jesus be who teaches in the synagogues, preaches the gospel of the kingdom, and heals every disease and infirmity (9:35)? John seems uncertain...because of what Jesus is reputed to be doing. He is not turning out to be the kind of Messiah John expected." I think Brueggemann is helpful here because he shows us that John's confusion has everything to do with the kind of Messiah Jesus is turning out to be.

From prison, John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask, Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? The word Matthew uses here for "another" is a Greek word (ἕτερον heteron) – which means something more like "another kind." So John is asking something like, Is Jesus the one, or are we to wait for a different kind of person altogether?

Jesus answers John's disciples, Go and tell John what you hear and see. But then Jesus tells them what they are hearing and seeing because presumably, they do not know what they are seeing and hearing. So Jesus tells them, in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

The blind see.
The lame walk.
The lepers are healed.
The deaf hear.
The dead are raised.
And the poor have the good news brought to them.

In other words, Jesus is telling John to look to Isaiah – because Isaiah saw clearly what God has promised to do in the world, and these are the kinds of things he should expect the Messiah to do.

But John wasn't expecting this, and that's why Jesus gives him one thumb down. ...the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he, says Jesus. John the Baptist was so focused on God's judgment that he couldn't see God's redemption.

As much as I hate to admit, I have a lot in common with John. I'm like John in that my expectations of God often keep me from seeing what God is doing. Expectations can be deceivingly dangerous – they can insulate you from the cold blast you just might need. This morning, we are being challenged to recalibrate our expectations – to reset them according to Isaiah's prophecy.

So in this Advent season, this time of expectation, I'd like to make three suggestions of where we might see God's redemption. And if we really want to lean into Advent, we'll find a way to participate in the restoring work of God.

Suggestion number one: **be on the lookout for blind people receiving their sight.** Over thanksgiving my mom shared with me that she and my dad had recently taken the Strengths Finder and it had opened their eyes to each other. Apparently, my parents discovered they each have the strength of strategic, which explains why they regularly butted heads in their planning. My dad came to find that he was not married to a sinister saboteur after all, but rather, a tactical talent. If you want to lean into Advent, get eyes that will help you appreciate and celebrate those around you, rather than be blind to their beauty.

My second suggestion is to **cleanse a leper.** While I doubt many of us know people with leprosy, we probably know siblings or aunts or uncles or cousins, who are alienated from the family. We need to expect God to heal this kind of disease. God wants to heal the rifts in our relationships with our parents or spouses or kids. Lean into God's redeeming work this Advent season, and you just might see someone cleansed of leprosy and welcomed home.

My last suggestion is that we **bring God's news to the poor.** Our Psalmist today is insistent that we will be happy if God is our help and our hope. And God's help, the Psalmist shows us, is very concrete:

- God gives bread
- God sets prisoners free
- God opens blind eyes
- God raises people who have fallen
- God loves the righteous
- God watches the homeless
- God sustains the orphan and the widow

When we participate in these kinds of actions, we take part in God's redemption. Our hope in God is not about spiritual escape, but about the simple, concrete care of the poor. We bring God's news to the poor by sharing our own lives that God has redeemed.

One last comment about seeing and joining in God's redemption this Advent season: It is God's redemption, not ours. One way we are sure to miss out on God is to have such low expectations of him that we leave him no room to work as we try to make everything come out right. Today James reminds us to wait on God. Be patient, he tells us, until the coming of the Lord. This is God's party, we're just the guests.

This Advent season, be on the lookout for God's redemption and get in on it. But don't think you can pull this off on your own. God cares much more about redeeming the world than you ever will. If you, like Jesus, take Isaiah seriously, you can expect that God will be about the business of redemption all over the place.