

Third Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2007
Matthew 11:2-15

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

The "Coming One" Has Arrived

1. Examine the evidence
2. Consider his forerunner
3. Seize the kingdom

^{NIV} Matthew 11:2 When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples³ to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

⁴ Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see:⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

¹¹ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.¹⁵ He who has ears, let him hear.

Dear Friends in Christ,

After Jesus arrived on the scene in Palestine, John the Baptist said of him, "**He must increase, but I must decrease.**" (John 3:30) And that's exactly what happened. Here in Matthew 11 the crowds that formerly followed John are now following Jesus, while John is in prison

at Herod's fortress, Machaerus, on the east side of the Dead Sea. John would not leave that prison alive.

Before he was executed, however, John sent two of his disciples to Jesus with this question: "*Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?*" "The one who was to come" is a reference to the promised Messiah, based on Psalm 40:7, where the Messiah says through King David, "**Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll.**" So John's disciples have come to ask Jesus directly, "Are you the Messiah, or do we keep waiting?"

Some people think this was John's question. They speculate that perhaps his imprisonment led to a kind of crisis of faith where John wasn't sure anymore that Jesus was the Christ. It's possible, perhaps. But Martin Luther believed that John sent these disciples to Jesus not because John himself had any doubts about the identity of Jesus but because *these disciples* were slow to believe that Jesus was "the Coming One." In other words, John suggested that his slow-of-heart disciples put their question directly to Jesus. Regardless of what prompted it, the question is important. Is Jesus of Nazareth the promised Messiah, the King and Savior sent from God, or should we keep looking? As we work to answer this question this morning we're going to (1) examine the evidence, then (2) consider Jesus' forerunner (John), and finally (3) we'll hear Jesus' call to seize the kingdom.

1. Examine the evidence

Jesus wasn't offended by the question John's disciples asked him. He answered it, but not by saying, "Yes, I am the one who was to come," but by saying, "*Go back and report to John what you hear and see.*" In other words, examine the evidence. Listen to what I say. Watch what I do. This is in keeping with the passage in John 10 where Jesus said: "**Do not believe me unless I do what the Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.**" (John 10:37-38)

So what would John's disciples have heard Jesus say and seen him do? Jesus sums up what's happening through his ministry: "*The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.*" If these words sound familiar, it's probably because they were part of this morning's First Lesson from Isaiah 35. There Isaiah had

said that when Messiah comes, everything will change. He spoke of the desert bursting into bloom and of a highway called “the Way of Holiness” on which the redeemed would walk. And he also said that when Messiah comes **“then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.”** (35:5-6)

So on the one hand you look at the prophecies of the Messiah’s coming and you see what the prophets predicted about him. Then you listen to Jesus and see what he does and his life and his ministry perfectly match the prophecy. You have to conclude, then, this Jesus is “the one who was to come.” And it’s not only these prophecies in Isaiah 35: it’s dozens of Old Testament prophecies regarding everything from the Messiah’s place of birth to the manner of his death. The Holy Spirit uses this marvel of prophecy and fulfillment to lead us to confess before Jesus, as we do in one of our hymns, **“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”** The evidence is overwhelming and it leads to this conclusion: Jesus is the Coming One.

Having gotten their answer, the disciples of John the Baptist leave, perhaps to go back to John at Machaerus. That’s when Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John with words that sound much like a eulogy. What Jesus says about John also leads us even more firmly to the conclusion that the Coming One has arrived in the person of Jesus.

2. Consider his forerunner

There was a time when some priests and Levites from Jerusalem came to John the Baptist and asked him who he was. They wondered if he was the Christ, the Coming One, and he denied it. That same question is in view here: Who is John the Baptist? Jesus begins by telling us who John the Baptist was *not*. *“What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?”* That is, did you go out into the desert to see a guy who wets his finger and sticks it into the wind before deciding what he ought to say? Not a chance. John was no slick orator who pandered to his audience, telling them what he thought they wanted to hear. His preaching was a stern call to repentance and he didn’t care what people thought of it. It was this characteristic of John—his unyielding will to speak the unvarnished truth of God—that had gotten him locked up in Herod’s dungeon in the first place. Herod was in an adulterous relationship with his sister-in-law and John had been telling him, **“It is not lawful for you to have her.”** (Matt. 14:4) John was no reed swaying in the desert winds.

Who else might John be? Jesus asks, *"If not, what did you go out into the desert to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?"* Nobody went to see John because of his wardrobe. He wore plain clothes of camel's hair, cinched together with a leather belt. This was no fashion show. *"Then what did you go out to see? A prophet?"* That's it. That's who John was. He was a prophet, that is, he was a spokesman for God. John is the only prophet I know, aside from our Lord himself, whose coming was specifically predicted in the Old Testament. Through Isaiah God had said, *"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."* John the Baptist was the messenger God sent to prepare the way for Jesus. And John was great. Jesus says, *"Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist."* To John went the honor of introducing the Messiah to a waiting world.

But did John think he was great? Hardly! He said he wasn't worthy to carry Jesus' sandals. He at first didn't want to baptize Jesus because he said, **"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"** (Matt. 3:14) Now if Jesus says John the Baptist is great, but John the Baptist says Jesus is immeasurably greater, how great must Jesus be? John was, as Isaiah told us, the messenger sent to prepare the way for Messiah. But the Messiah is greater. The Messiah is the Son of God. Messiah means "anointed one" and Jesus was anointed by the Father with the Holy Spirit to preach good news to the poor, that is, to preach the forgiveness of sins to those in poverty of spirit repent of their sins. John said once that he was like a groomsman to Jesus, the bridegroom. The groomsman is there to serve the bridegroom, not to steal the limelight or displace him. When John had done his work, he deferred to Jesus and retreated into the shadows. That tells us as much about Jesus as it does about John.

So what now? The evidence is in and the verdict is clear: Jesus is the Coming One. This was the consistent message of John the Baptist. John was great, but Jesus the Messiah is greater still. So what? As you were? Same old, same old with nothing changed? No, the coming of the Coming One is an opportunity not to be missed. "Seize the kingdom," Jesus says here.

3. Seize the kingdom

At the end of this section, Jesus says, *"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."* In the last chapter of Malachi, the last chapter of the Old Testament, the LORD said, **"See, I**

will send you Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes." (4:5) Here Jesus identifies John the Baptist as the Elijah who was to come. If John the Baptist is Elijah, calling the people to repent like Elijah did, then the great and dreadful day of the LORD isn't far behind. It's one more piece of evidence that Jesus of Nazareth is the Coming One.

Jesus says here that the kingdom of heaven has been "forcefully advancing." "Kingdom of heaven" is a way of referring to God's kingdom, his rule in the lives of his people. When John was baptizing at the Jordan River, God's kingdom was coming to more and more people as they obeyed the call to repent and were baptized for the forgiveness of sins. This forceful advance of the kingdom of heaven was continuing through the ministry of Jesus. The good news was being heard and believed. People were being saved. Satan was suffering one defeat after another. What remained was a horrible cross and the stillness of the grave, but by the power of this Coming One even crucifixion and death would be turned into glorious victories. The good news of forgiveness in Jesus was going to go out to the ends of the earth and people of every tribe and tongue would be added to the church.

Christ's kingdom is still making powerful strides today. The kingdom continues to advance. And, Jesus says, forceful men take hold of it. Remember what Jesus asked the people who went out into the wilderness while John was preaching? He asked, "*What did you go out into the desert to see?*" (11:7) That's all they were at first: spectators, curious onlookers. That's all some of them ever were. And there have always been such people. Ben Franklin was asked once about his religion, specifically about his beliefs regarding Jesus. In 1790, when Franklin was a very old man, he wrote a letter to Ezra Stiles which said in part, "As to Jesus of Nazareth, my opinion of whom you particularly desire...I have, with most of the present dissenters in England, some doubts as to his divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble." That sounds like a classic case of someone who has heard the message of the kingdom, but refrains from believing it. But there were others who believed the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. They saw the kingdom of God advancing and by the Spirit's power they seized it. They took the opportunity God's grace afforded them.

We don't know what became of these disciples of John, just as we don't know whether it was their question or John's that they came to put to Jesus. If it was John's question, did it lay his doubts to rest? If it was the disciples' question, did this lead them to put their faith in Jesus as the Coming One? We don't know the answer to these questions, but we do know what Jesus wants. He wants us to lay hold of his kingdom, to put our faith in him as the fulfillment of God's promises to send a Savior. No more doubt and hesitation. No more observing the ministry of Jesus without commitment. He is the one who was to come. When he comes to us, as he has, it's time repent of our misplaced priorities and our half-hearted commitment. It's time to lay hold of the kingdom of heaven with joyful faith. It's time to welcome the Coming One as King of our hearts and lives. Amen.