

December 11, 2022

IS THERE A WITNESS IN THE HOUSE?

Matthew 11: 2-11

If I did not know anything about Christ and Christmas, and I was asked to describe what this season is all about, I would have said that this is the season of shopping.

Every moment and through every medium available, we are bombarded with ads that seek to entice us to buy things that someone decides that we must have for the holidays and things that are being offered at bargains that seem just too good to pass up.

But with the shopping frenzy that is so much a part of this season, comes another thing that many seldom speak about - it is called “buyer’s remorse”. The sense of regret that one sometimes experiences after having made a purchase. The doubt and fear that overtakes you as you wonder if you have made the right choice, or the disappointment that you feel as you discover that the item that you purchased does not live up to expectations.

Doubts and regrets - we face them so often in life; not only in relation to things in which we invest our money but also in relation to things and people in which and in whom we invest ourselves. People and things for which and for whom we lay it all on the line – our heart and our emotions, our hopes and dreams, our pride and our reputation, and even our lives.

It is deeply troubling to invest yourself in something or someone, only to discover later on, that that thing or that person does not live up to your expectations, giving rise to doubt and fear about whether you did the right thing.

When I read our scripture for today about John the Baptist languishing in prison, my heart goes out to him - caught as he was in the grip of unsettling doubt, very likely brought on by unfulfilled expectations. If faith in God was a commodity that could have been purchased, it would be fair to say that John was likely having a case of buyer’s remorse.

John, like every other devout Jew of his time, was living with the expectation that the messiah, the deliverer, the liberator would come and free them from the oppression under which they lived.

O come, O come, Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here,
until the Son of God appears.

That was the hope and expectation.

John, unlike most of his country folks, was quick to recognize in Jesus, the promised Messiah. He was the first, and it would seem for a while, the only one to do so. Describing himself as “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord”. (John 1: 23)

When Jesus went to John to be baptised, one can only imagine how excited and hopeful John must have been about Jesus— at last, the saviour is here! But things weren’t unfolding as John expected. John, probably emboldened by what he believed to be the liberator coming in the person of Jesus, stood up to the powers that be, and spoke out against what was wrong, and as a result, he ended up in prison.

As the days and weeks and months went by, John was probably wondering why he was still languishing in prison. Where was Jesus, the liberator, the saviour and messiah?

Was he wrong about Jesus? Did he stake his life on the wrong promise and the wrong person? For as far as John can tell, the Messiah has changed nothing. Nothing has worked out as John thought it would.

In chains and in crisis, John was left with a troubling question, so he sent his disciples to Jesus to enquire: “*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*” It would seem that John was having a case of buyer’s remorse.

Jesus did not chide John for having his doubts, or for wondering what was going on. Nor did he lecture him on the fulfilment of scripture. He sent a simple message to John. He told John’s disciples: “*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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*”

Go and bear witness to John of what you hear and see.

We all, at one time or another, very likely have been in that place where John found himself - that place of questioning and doubt.

Sad and unfortunate things happen to us or to someone dear to us, and we want to believe that in spite of that, God is still working his purpose out, that God is still in control. We try to convince ourselves that somehow things are going to be okay, but try as we may, we just cannot get rid of that haunting question; Why Me? “Why did this have to happen to me, to my husband or wife, my mother or father, my child, my best friend?

We struggle with such questions, and when we do, we wonder where is God.

Yes, we affirm that “In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone.” But there are times when it sure does not feel that way. It very likely did not feel that way to John.

But Jesus’ response to John speaks loudly to us today, as it did to John in prison. And it challenges us not to limit God’s love and grace and redemptive power to our own experiences and expectations. God’s work of love and salvation does not begin or end with any one of us, no matter how close we are to God, no matter how faithful a disciple of Christ we may be. Our own experience, however real it is, however fulfilling or disappointing, by itself, is always going to be an inadequate and incomplete measure of God’s grace and love. God is bigger than our own

limited experiences. We have to look outside ourselves and see God at work in the lives of other people. We have to embrace the stories and experiences of others as well.

When John was in doubt and seemingly quite despondent, Jesus sent John's disciples to Go and tell John the stories of others, the stories of lives being transformed, people being renewed, hope being restored, the poor receiving good news for a change. Tell John, so that hope and joy can be rekindled in his heart. Tell John, so that he can be strengthened and encouraged in his own struggle - so that he can see that God is indeed present and active.

But there is another very important dimension to this story, and it's about the role of the disciples of John. They were sent by John to Jesus with the question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus sent them back to tell John what they saw and heard. And they went back as bearers of good news, as witnesses to the transformation of lives.

Do we not hear both the joyful message and the urgent challenge of Advent and Christmas in that - the message of good news and the challenge to share that good news?

As we follow the Christmas story, we are told that on the day of Jesus' birth, an angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds out in the field and said to them: *"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Christ the Lord. ... And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!' When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them."* (Luke 2:11-18)

The shepherds were amazed at what they heard and saw, and they shared that good news with others. Advent and Christmas are about receiving, experiencing and sharing good news.

Whoever we are, as we recognize the presence and work of God in whatever ways, we owe it to others to share what we see and hear.

As we experience the love and grace and peace of God, we owe it to others to share how we have been experiencing the goodness of God.

As our lives take on greater meaning because of Christ, we owe it to others to encourage them in their searching and questioning.

As we come to a greater assurance of faith, we owe it to others to support them through their doubts and fears.

As we experience joy, we owe it to others to share that joy.

We owe it to others to help them catch a glimpse of God - in our own lives and in the world.

There are many people who can use some good news.

There are many people who are sick, lonely, depressed, fearful, skeptical, questioning, and confused about life and God and what is good. There are many who are living with great uncertainty and regret. Do we have anything to share with them that can lift up their heads, so that they can see God at work?

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, and the theme is Joy. The purest and most profound joy comes when we help others to find hope and peace.

“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.”

How encouraged John must have felt when he heard that.

The messengers from John to Jesus returned as the messengers of Jesus to John. They returned bearing witness to the transformation of lives. That is what Advent and Christmas are about. That is what we are invited to be a part of. That is what we are called to do – be messengers of good news – sharing what we have seen and heard of God’s active presence and transformative work.

There are many who are longing to hear some good news. Will you be that messenger?

Is there a witness in the house?

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