

Sermon, St. David's, Advent 3A, 12/12/2019, Isaiah 35:1-10, Psalm 146:4-9, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Lucky for us, we get John the Baptist *twice* in Advent. Today, the second appearance of John might seem a little dissonant, since today is also Refreshment Sunday: the Sunday we get pink. Actually, it's rose. Refreshment Sunday is a tradition in both Lent and Advent, traditionally seasons of solemnity, when we get a little refreshment and rejoicing for one Sunday. In Isaiah, the desert rejoices in blossom and joy and singing. Our selection from Psalm 146 starts with "happy are they" and ends with "Hallelujah!"

But while we're breaking out the pink and rejoicing, John the Baptist's Gospel story has taken a turn for the worse. Last week, clad in camel's hair, John was baptizing people in the wilderness, calling on them to repent. He shouted insults at people in between bites of locusts. He made dire predictions about where their lives were headed if they didn't repent.

But this week, John is not shouting. He's in prison. Last week, he was the one with a public ministry. Jesus was about to come to John to be baptized, and it would be *after* Jesus' baptism and 40 days in the wilderness that Jesus would begin public ministry. Now, Jesus has a very public ministry, but John is in prison. No longer bursting with fervor. Not sounding so confident in his belief. In fact, he sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we wait for another?"

Waiting. That's at the core of Advent. That's the topic of today's snippet from James as well. Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. The farmer can prepare for rain by sowing and planting and weeding. But, the farmer can't make it rain. James writes that the farmer waits patiently.

Waiting and preparing are both parts of Advent, but they aren't quite the same thing. Preparing is more active. John the Baptist was called to help prepare the way of the Lord, and he did so, calling on people to repent and baptizing them. He was full of fire and vigor.

Now, he is no longer preparing, but waiting. How long will he be stuck in prison? The king is afraid of executing him. John is languishing. And his faith sounds a bit ambivalent, when he asks, are you the one? This is the same man who, when Jesus came to be baptized, said to him, I'm the one who needs to be baptized: not you! Back then, John seemed sure that Jesus was the one. He'd been preparing for Jesus. But now, he's worried. He's been waiting. Does he have to keep waiting?

How long, o Lord?

The people were waiting for a savior, but Jesus wasn't what many of them had prepared for. They expected a king, but he was an poor child. They expected a warrior, but he didn't advocate violence.

John said last week that the Messiah was going to clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary; but burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. He may have expected such a

firebrand to come break him out of prison. At the very least, you would think that Jesus would go visit his cousin who baptized him.

Instead, Jesus sent John's disciples back, telling them to report that blind had received their sight. Lepers were cleansed. The poor had good news brought to them.

Where's the good news for poor John the Baptist? Did he get what he was waiting for? Or has he become, in the words of today's epistle, an example of suffering and patience? He is certainly suffering in prison, this man who had been famous. Now Jesus is becoming famous, and seems to be talking about John as if he's already dead. And soon, he will be. He's not getting out of prison.

So what was he waiting and preparing for, all of those years in the desert, wearing camel's hair and eating bugs and baptizing people?

If he was preparing to become so important that the Messiah would drop everything to show up with his winnowing fork and bust John out of prison: well, that didn't happen. But scriptures are being fulfilled. People are seeing and hearing who couldn't see and hear before. The lepers, who were outcast, are now able to return to their communities.

The poor are hearing good news.

What are you waiting for, this Advent? Together we are waiting to celebrate the first coming of Christ. On Christmas Eve, we will remember his birth and sing Silent Night by candlelight, which for many is the most magical part of the season. Everything is dark, and usually it's cold outside, but we share that light. We sing.

We also wait for the second coming of Christ, even though we probably don't spend a lot of time thinking about or actively preparing for that. In our liturgy, we pray together "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." We pray that over and over, yet many of us don't internalize it. We think Christ already came, and Advent is a countdown to Christmas. But in Advent, we are also called to prepare and wait for Christ to come again.

What are you waiting for? Are you prepared? Do you take time to think about what Christ would find in your life if he showed up today? John was languishing in prison, so he had a lot of time to think and wait. Do you have time in your life for such reflection? Do you make time to pray—and do your prayers include time for listening, or are your prayers kind of wish list of what you want?

Sometimes I feel like a horrible hypocrite during Advent, preaching a message of slowing down, because for me, this is one of the busiest times of year. For me, the 12-day season of Christmas is when I get to slow down. Right now, I have interviews to get through, sermons to write, meetings to host. I'm wearing my hair like this because I haven't been able to make time for a haircut in the last 5 weeks.

If Jesus shows up this afternoon, I hope I'm not worrying about my hair. But when I get so frantically busy, it's too easy to forget that I am called to prepare for Jesus to come again. We are called to prioritize prayer. We are all called to wait.

I hate waiting, because it gets in the way of my busy schedule. It feels like a waste. I imagine with horror John the Baptist's long days of waiting. Waiting for his disciples to return with Jesus; but instead, they return with a message.

The blind received 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.

I wonder how waiting changed John the Baptist. I wonder how embracing waiting can change you and me.