

Gaudete—3rd Sunday in Advent Matthew 11:2-11(Isaiah 40:1-8; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now when John heard in prison about the works of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we be expecting another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me. As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you." Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. Thus far the word of our Lord.

Ever since the Apostle Matthew recorded this event in Holy Scripture, theologians and churchmen have debated its meaning. Are we to conclude that John the Baptist, of all people, was beginning to have doubts about Jesus? It sounds as though this is the case, considering what he told his disciples to ask Jesus.

Are you the one who is to come, or shall we be expecting another? For a guy who was such a bold confessor of the Christ, this question makes him appear rather wishy-washy. The prophets of God foretold the coming Messiah, the Savior of his people, yet they only could point forward in time to his incarnation. John, on the other hand, was able to point with his finger and proclaim behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Now John the Baptist, the faithful confessor of Jesus, had been imprisoned by the Galilean tetrarch Herod. He had fulfilled his calling and completed his mission of preparing the way for the coming one—for this reason alone would God have allowed him to be incarcerated. But because John heard of Jesus' miracles while in prison, he sent his disciples to him to inquire whether he was the coming one. Was he really and truly the Messiah and Savior of the nations who had been promised in the Scriptures?

When these disciples came to Jesus, they found him in the midst of performing miracles and preaching. And having not yet been convinced, they asked him their assigned question Are you the one who is to come, or shall we be expecting another? This is a yes or no question. Yet this is not how Jesus answers. Rather, he told them to go back and report to John what they are seeing with their own eyes—blind people receiving their sight and the lame walking; leprous people being cleansed and deaf people beginning to hear. They even saw Jesus raise some from the dead, and he preached the Gospel to the poor. And he said to them blessed is he who is not offended by me. That is to say, blessed is he who doesn't take offense at my humility and stumble because of it.

So the disciples left him and returned to report to John and those with him about the works of God that Jesus had done—the compassion he showed and the sweet Gospel he proclaimed, as well as his stern warning not to stumble over his lowliness, when one would expect such a person to be residing in a king's palace.

And as they left, Jesus started to speak to the people about John—what did you come out into the desert to see? A reed shaken in the wind? Did you come out to see a man with no real convictions—

who is blown to and fro by every wind of doctrine? What did you come out to see—one who seeks popularity and the praise of men, and is compensated so handsomely that he wears fine designer clothes and lives in a house fit for a king? Or what did you come out to see? A prophet? It has been many centuries since the last prophet, do you mean to find the next one in John the Baptist? Truly I say to you that John is far more than a prophet. For he himself was foretold in the Scriptures. It was about him that it is written: Behold I send my messenger before you, who will prepare the way for you.

With these words our Lord Jesus praises John not just as a faithful and steadfast preacher of the divine Word, but describes him also as the promised forerunner who would prepare the way for the Messiah. He therein was declaring that the long awaited fullness of time had come, was now there, and that he, Jesus, was the promised and awaited Messiah and Savior of the world of whom John had preached.

Now the main thing for you this day, dear Christian, is this: do you look upon Christ Jesus in the way John taught his disciples to recognize and receive—as the coming one, who is their dear Savior? In a word, what do you think about Jesus? Let us apply John's question to ourselves. How is it that we can believe in and receive Christ Jesus as our Savior and Redeemer? But what manner of question is this? Don't we do this? Yes, by God's grace. But do you also recognize your awful flesh and blood? Do you not also know your Old Adam? Your sinful nature, your Old Adam, will never believe. He will remain contrary to the Gospel. He will always lift up his wretched reason over his knowledge of Christ. He will always look to his own works of righteousness over against the merit of Christ, which alone saves.

Do not underestimate your Old Adam, your sinful nature. It is not something that can be ignored, for it is always with you and continually works against the baptized believer. It is oh, so vital, that we honestly ask the question, How is it that we can believe in and receive Christ Jesus as the Savior—the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? The answer is found in the Holy Gospel just read to you. So that we always believe in and receive him as our dear Savior, we must always see and hear Jesus, as the disciples sent by John did. But how can we hear him and witness his works ourselves? **IN HIS WORD!**

In the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus to us. He reveals Christ Jesus to us in the Old Testament, where the prophets of the Lord God of Israel foretold of the one who was to come. He is revealed in the Gospels, where we have his actual words uttered and deeds rendered while he was in the flesh and dwelt among us. He is revealed in the epistles and the Revelation, where the Holy Spirit, by means of the apostles, tells us about the one who will come again. And it is the Holy Spirit himself who grants you the faith and trust in the Word of Scripture, to believe it and receive it as the truth of God. Think about this and ponder this.

Doesn't this seem so basic and primitive? Isn't there something more grand and spectacular to look for? If Jesus is the Savior of the nations, shouldn't we be feeling or experiencing something exciting? Shouldn't we be looking for a sign, a burning in our bosom, an emotional connection, to show us that this is the truth? Beware these words of your Old Adam, who, with the world around you, considers the Gospel foolishness and rather seeks signs and wonders. For the sinful, unbelieving heart receives not the simple yet all important message of the cross. Jesus performed miracles indeed—restored sight and hearing to the blind and deaf, he healed the lame, and he raised the dead. But he did these things to show the people that he was the coming one.

These things Jesus did for people were wonderful, to be sure, but he did not come down from heaven and into the world to be a mere physician. He came to die. His miracles are not what put to death the Old Adam in the sinner and raise the believer to newness of life. It is his death and his resurrection. Today in our annual Christmas program we reflect on the wonder of the Nativity of our Lord—how the

eternal Son of God, who is the Word who was with God in the beginning, took on our flesh and blood, and in the fullness of time was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a humble virgin. Christians have learned the biblical story with the aid of nativity scenes, complete with Joseph and Mary, the wise men, and the Child in the manger. Yet the little Child wrapped in swaddling cloths lay in a wooden manger only because he would eventually be nailed to the wooden cross. Baby Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world because he would be crucified and would die for them.

We rejoice in the coming of the Savior at Bethlehem, for the Messiah who had come to his people to redeem them would make the trek to Jerusalem, and upon his final entry into the city, would have his blood shed for our sins. Jesus was the coming one, he is the coming one, he will be the coming one, and we shall be expecting no other. He came to his people through the Old Testament Scriptures, as the one who would crush the head of the serpent. He would be called Immanuel—God with us. He would be named Jesus, for he would save his people from their sins. And when the fullness of time had come, he came in the flesh, born of Mary at Bethlehem. He walked the earth as one of us, he performed miracles to fulfill what had been foretold, and he went to the cross to die for the sins of the world. But this was not the end. He rose again on the third day and ascended into heaven with the promise that he would be with his people unto the end of the age.

He has come to his people for twenty centuries now, through his Word and in his Sacraments, to bring sinners to faith, to wash them from their sins, and to keep them steadfast in the one true faith until he returns. But even this is not the end. He will come again in glory to judge both the quick and the dead. The graves will be opened and the living and the dead will stand before him. And how do we know these things? We know and wholeheartedly believe it because of the way he continues to come to us— through his precious Word of Scripture that makes us wise unto salvation.

Be comforted to know that your Savior comes to you through his Word. For his Word does not change any more than he does, who is Christ Jesus yesterday, today, and forever. He is the Lord when you receive him with enthusiasm and zeal, as were the witnesses to his miracles. But he is also the Lord even when you face hardship and doubt, as John the Baptist did while he languished in prison and faced death. Regardless of your fluctuating feelings, the same truth is proclaimed anew every day, that Christ Jesus died to save sinners.

We celebrate the coming of our Savior in the manger at Bethlehem because it is through him that our sins are forgiven and the gates of heaven are opened. Through his atoning death he conquered your death, and raises you to a new life. By faith granted through the Holy Spirit, we now have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ because you have been forgiven all your sins, In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.