

Not How It's Supposed to Be

The Third Sunday in Advent

December 17, 2023

Matthew 11:2–10

It wasn't supposed to be this way, was it? John, the forerunner of the Messiah. John, the one who had been prophesied in the Old Testament to be the one to prepare the way of the Lord. Crying out in the wilderness, as we heard foretold in the Old Testament reading for today. John, the one who proclaimed boldly the message of repentance and of forgiveness of sins. John, the fearless admonisher of King Herod of his adultery.

And here is where that landed him. In a prison cell. He's all alone. He's no longer able to preach. He's not able to baptize anyone anymore. He is left alone with his thoughts. This is what it has come to? Is this the way it was supposed to be? Had not God called him to point people to the Messiah? If his proclaiming and baptizing landed him in a cell, could it be that Jesus was not the one? Should we look for another?

At this time of year as the holidays approach conflicting emotions can arise in the midst of holiday cheer. Is this the way it is supposed to be? Sadness can well up from loved ones you have lost. Regrets from missed opportunities. Your holiday joy may be dampened as you face illness. Feelings of good cheer may be overwhelmed by family turmoil. Is this the way your life is supposed to be? Is this what things are supposed be like when you are a Christian? Are all the non-Christians right when they dismiss Jesus as the one? Should you look elsewhere for help or hope or comfort?

Jesus' answer to John is to list off all the things He has done. Tell John what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news. Jesus has accomplished all these extraordinary and wonderful things. People have been blessed. They have been restored. They have been cleansed. They have been made whole. They have been comforted. All of that should be enough to show that He is the Messiah.

But Jesus is saying much more than that. In listing all these things He has done He is reminding John of what was prophesied that the Messiah would do. These are the things the one who was to come would carry out. Jesus has accomplished them, He is the one. If John is wondering if this is the way it was supposed to be, Jesus' answer is, Yes, this is the way it was supposed to be. Yes, I am the one.

Now Jesus has the perfect opportunity to continue to show all the people how He Himself is the one. But He speaks to them about John. What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swaying in the wind? Sidewalk preachers are a dime a dozen. They're all the same. But no, they went out to see John the Baptist because they had heard that he was preaching with power. He was baptizing people for repentance of sins. He was telling them that they needed to turn from their sins and instead live in a holy way, in compliance with the Ten Commandments.

Did they go out to see a man dressed in soft clothing? No, those who dress in fine clothing are in royal palaces. They went out to see the guy who was wearing camel's hair and eating locusts for breakfast. They went out to see the guy who acted a lot like the great prophet Elijah in the Old Testament. They went out to see this guy who may have been a little on the eccentric side. They didn't need to hear what those who in lived in palaces had to say, how did that apply to their daily lives? They went out to listen to this guy who had a message that was as audacious as Elijah was in his time. Calling people to repentance. Telling them to stop sinning.

What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, you went out to see a man who was proclaiming eternal truths, a message from God. Did you go out to see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one of whom it was prophesied: See, I am sending My messenger ahead of you; he will prepare Your way before You. Jesus has shown how He Himself is the Messiah, the promised Savior.

Now He is speaking to the people about John. A prophet. But so much more. He is the one who was sent ahead of the Messiah. He is the one who prepared the way for the Messiah.

In telling the people who John was Jesus in fact was teaching the people who He Himself was. That John was the forerunner of the Messiah means that Jesus is the very Messiah. John had proclaimed the Messiah would come and then when he saw Jesus, he said, Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John knew that he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He was the one pointing people to the Messiah. It was this person, this man, Jesus of Nazareth. John knew of himself that he must decrease while the one he was paving the way for must increase.

And that is exactly what happened. But is this how it was supposed to be? Ending up in prison? Wondering if it really was all true? Yes, this is how it was supposed to be. John had paved the way, he now was decreasing. In fact, his life would not be much longer in this world. Soon after imprisoning him, Herod beheaded him. John pointed people to Jesus and now Jesus was here.

Along with John you may be wondering if how your life is going is the way things are supposed to be. Sometimes you struggle in your life because of your own dumb mistakes or your particularly sinful decisions and actions. Sometimes people hurt you or you suffer misfortune. At times you are hit with news that shocks you and you don't know how you're going to go forward from there. Is this how it is supposed to be, this kind of uncertainty and helplessness? It is not the way it was meant to be. But it is the way things are in this fallen, sinful world.

But this is exactly why Jesus came, isn't it? Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Savior to come and then ended up betrayed and was unlawfully convicted and condemned. He was on the receiving end of blows and they spit in His face. It all ended not in a prison cell but on a cross. Is this how things were supposed to be? Jesus, the Lord of all, the promised Savior, being degraded and tortured?

Yes, this is how it was supposed to be. Jesus knew this beforehand. He chose this from eternity. This is why He came into this world full of uncertainty and pain and sin. He was born precisely in order to be betrayed and beaten and crucified. He knew from the beginning He was going to the cross so that there all your sins and all your guilt and all your wicked things you have done could be taken up into His life as He offered up His pure and innocent life in sacrifice to the holy God.

John asked Jesus, "Are you the one?" He knew it, but things weren't looking too good for him. In asking Jesus he got his answer. Jesus came for everything that is wrong in this life. And what is God's answer to your need, your uncertainty? When you wonder if it's all supposed to be this way? His answer is the same, it is His Son.

What you have heard and seen? In His Word you have heard of all the things Jesus has done. They are miraculous. They are fulfillment of the promise of the Savior who was to come. He has come and has forgiven you your sins. He has brought you into eternal life. Even as you struggle in this life in weakness and uncertainty you live eternally. Jesus is the one, He has brought you into His life in your Baptism and He brings His life into you in His Holy Communion. Yes, this is the way it is supposed to be, now and forever. Amen.

SDG

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