

During the season of Advent one of the main themes is preparing for Jesus to come into the world, and this fits well in all our Christmas preparations because just like every year before, once again, this year, we will celebrate Jesus birth and his coming into the world.

But we also know this time of preparation is a time when we look to the future when Jesus will come again and bring all of his own together at the end of all days. During Advent one of the main characters in all this is John the Baptizer who was the messenger that announced the coming Messiah, who recognized Jesus as that one, and even had the honor of baptizing the Almighty son of God in the river Jordan. John had an incredible role in God's plan, and in our gospel lesson, Jesus even says there has been no one before that is greater than John. Now that's saying something!! Just to put him in the company of the other great religious figures like Moses or Abraham or David or Elijah is something, but to put him above them!!! That tells me we need to pay more attention to him. We need to pay more attention to this wild man who was crying out in the wilderness, "Repent! Return to the Lord!! Prepare the way, prepare for his Coming!!"

And yet in today's reading we find don't find John looking like the greatest of all men or women before him. We don't find the power in his words or the assurance in his actions that we might expect of such a great man. For John has been thrown into prison. He had been cut off from his friends, and his followers.

He had been cut off from the rest of the world. And as he sat in the prison cell, he remembered his days in the wilderness when every word he spoke was with certainty and assurance. He proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, and he heard of the healing and the miracles that Jesus was bringing to people. But now he was in prison, and uncertain of his future. There were miracles for some, but it didn't seem like any miracles were coming his way. So, John wavers some in his faith and sends word through Jesus' disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

In our own lives, we too, have times when we feel cut off from the support we need, cut off from the certainty that we once had, at times we feel as if we're even cut off from God. We'll pray for a miracle, but it doesn't seem like any miracles are coming our way. Things don't turn out the way we'd like and we ask, "If Jesus is so powerful, why can't he get me out of this crisis. If Jesus is so powerful why didn't he save her from that accident or that illness? If Jesus is so powerful why didn't he prevent that terrorist attack? Why doesn't he just step in and stop the wars and all the killing of the innocents? Like John, we find it easy to question and doubt Jesus when he doesn't save us from our problems. We who were once sure of our faith may have found reasons to not be so sure.

And we all experience these times of uncertainty. I remember when I went to graduate school and we had our first test in my Clinical psychology class. Everyone was sweating, and I had no idea what to expect.

When we got our grades back I was surprised to have one of the best grades in the class, I think I had the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest score, and I told myself, hey, I can do this, I felt great, while some of my classmates were really concerned and met with our professors. But when the 2<sup>nd</sup> exam came around, I figured I could handle this and thought I studied about the same, but ended up with one of the worst grades in the class. Talk about rocking my world. Just as suddenly as I had gained confidence, now I was insecure and uncertain. And that's when all those questions start popping up. Not just about the task at hand, but about our entire lives. Can I do this? Am I a capable person? Is my life significant? Who do I even matter to? And we can get bogged down with all those "why" questions that can never provide a definite answer.

As we approach Christmas, we know that for many, the holidays are not a time of celebration, but a time of loneliness and sorrow. Even family time can be a time of tension and conflict.

And so we have questions, deep questions.

Is there really a God who knows and cares? Does God have a plan for this world?

Does God really have a plan for me?

If believers can have our moments like these, just imagine what non-believers must go through as they try to fill the spiritual void in their lives. They may ask,

"Is this Christian thing, the real thing or should I look for another?"

Visitors who come into our church to worship are asking that question too, they're asking, "Is this where I can find God? Are you really God's servants, or should I look somewhere else?"

When the great John the Baptist asks, "Are you the one who is to come?" He too, is searching for answers, and his question is really a quest for meaning.

So there was a group of street workers who came to work one week, and their job was to blast through the asphalt and concrete of the streets with air hammers, and that week the foreman had them dig a number of holes that were five feet deep. After they finished the boss would inspect the holes and then say, "OK, fill it back up." This routine went on all morning long. At noon the men all came to the foreman and said, "We quit. Give us our pay, we're outta here." The foreman was shocked. He asked was the work too hard? Was the pay too low? One of the men finally blurted out, "We quit because no one is going to make fools of us – digging holes all day long just to fill them back up!" Then the foreman explained that the reason they were digging the holes was because the records had been lost, and they were trying to relocate the water mains. With that explanation, the men went back to work. They could now see some meaning for all their labor, because without that sense of meaning in our work, or in our lives, it can be unbearable. Without a sense of meaning, we live under a sense of being manipulated or controlled, of even being condemned.

So to restore our sense of meaning and our faith we ask questions. To ask whether Jesus is the one, is to ask what it is all about. To ask that question is in and of itself turning back to God. To ask of God, is to repent. John's questioning is the first step toward changing his mind and returning to that confidence and assurance. And the answer can only come from faith.

Hundreds of years before Christ, Isaiah prophesied about the day when the Lord would come, he said, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. Waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert, The burning sand shall become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water.

New life, where there was none, a time of refreshing, nurturing, renewing, healing.

When John asks Jesus, "Are you the one?" Jesus responds by saying just look around you, 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."

Now that may not have been what John was expecting from the Messiah. John may have been looking for that political leader that the others Jews wanted, that would vanquish their enemies and lead Israel back to a place of power. He may have been looking for a personal favor to be released from prison, or to have someone healed or restored to life. But by turning back to God, John heard that the words of the prophets were being fulfilled. Jesus is the one and Jesus continues to be the one today as well.

And I can tell you how the kingdom is breaking into the world around us today. I can tell you how our Lutheran church is still looking out for and walking with those victims of hurricanes Irma and Maria. I can tell you our church is booming with new life in Africa, I can tell you how churches that were not too far from closing found a way to create a new diverse congregations inspired by the Spirit and alive in the hearts of its members. I can tell you of many personal stories of transformation and healing. I can tell all these things, these wonderful deeds, but by concentrating on them we may miss the message, because they won't change you unless you repent, and turn back to God and embrace his plan for your life, even if it's not what you expected.

Jesus claimed that John was the greatest man or woman up to that point and yet he needed to turn back to God. In the spirit of the season, let's all repent, let's ask those tough questions, and let's turn in faith to God, who makes all things new. Amen.