

## Isaiah 35: 1-10; Matthew 11: 2-11 Unexpectedly at Work

The readings from the Isaiah in the First was about transformation of relationship among the nations; tools of destruction turned into tools to sustain life. The passage for the Second Sunday of Advent was about the transformation of the world not just among the people but among all of God's creation. In Today's passage, the transformation is of natural world and human conditions, not just of physical conditions but also of emotional restoration to wholeness of all of God's creation. This image of dry desert in full bloom, physical frailty replaced with strength and wholeness and a fearful heart given courage and made fearless, too, is our destiny in God's future, and we can rejoice! The Scripture says.

If this full-on joy is not bubbling up in you this Advent season, it is not for the lack of faith; there is a good reason. For the departure point for our God-promised destination is where we are at, this reality of the world that we live in.

We see the beauty of Jemez valley that surrounds us, the breath-taking full-moon and the bright blue sky that greets us in the morning, and our hearts are lifted up and we feel gratitude for such wonderful world that surrounds us. But as we move into the day, we are soon reminded of our friends and family going through difficult times, not to mention the tension and conflicts within our small circles of family, workplace, or even at church; or we hear the news of suffering from another corner of our country, or the plight of the people living in war in another corner of our world. This is where our world is at.

And it is where John the Baptist is at. The last week when we were introduced to John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, he was preaching repentance and baptizing people with water in Jordan River. He was calling people to repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. He was speaking about the one who was to come. That was Chapter 3 and today we are in Chapter 11 in the Gospel of Matthew. What has happened in between? Jesus's own baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus's temptation, his calling of his disciples, his teaching and healing ministry.

And in the meantime, John has been imprisoned by the power-that-be, the king Herod. John was anticipating that the Messiah would come and do away with all that resisted the coming of God's kingdom, stripping the power-that-be of their very power to abuse God's children and

all creation, transforming the power dynamics and achieving that great reversal the prophets of old had foretold.

Yet that power-that-be, the King Herod, had imprisoned him. John had preached repentance because the Messiah, one greater than him, who were to baptize with the Holy Spirit and Fire were, to come with winnowing forks of judgment, clearing the threshing floor and throw chaff to burn in unquenchable fire. But, as far as John could tell, this Jesus was keeping himself busy doing random acts of kindness. Where is his winnowing fork, where is the axe, where is the unquenchable fire? And, why in the world are these evil oppressors going about their business as if nothing has changed, IF Jesus was the one to come? This Jesus was not what John the Baptist had expected in the Messiah, not exactly.

What did I miss? John starts to wonder. Was I mistaken? So, he sends his disciples to Jesus, asking “Are you the one who was to come, or are we to wait for another?” I wonder what kind of answer John expected. This question comes from the place of doubt that Jesus may not be the Messiah, because he’s not acting like one. Or the question could be heard as a challenge “IF you are the one who was to come, perhaps you should start acting like one.”

John’s own expectations for what the Messiah would do, however rooted they were in his own tradition, got in the way of his being able to recognize the saving acts of Jesus that were unexpectedly at work. They were no random acts of kindness; they were the inbreaking of the kingdom of heaven. Just as John had said, they were the sign that the kingdom of heaven had come near.

All of sudden, this wild Prophet of old is just like us. For, how often have we doubted God, in the crisis of our lives, are you really the almighty God who loves us and protects us? Or even say, “well, IF you are really God, why did you allow this to happen, or why didn’t you do something about...” fill in the blank. I wonder if John was not just doubtful but also disappointed, and even angry, as we might find ourselves sometimes.

How does Jesus answer John’s question? He does not point to himself and say “Yes, it’s me you’ve been waiting for.” He says, “the blind receives 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” He points to the transformation he is enacting, the transformation that is life-restoring, healing, liberating, and hope-giving... the very reversal the Prophets of Old had proclaimed.

So, what made John the Baptist question or doubt Jesus? John was the last of traditional prophet of Israel. As we saw in Prophet Isaiah, who was advising the King of Israel in times of international political mess under the threat of the Assyrian empire. Then the later prophet or prophets who wrote under the brand name of Isaiah, they were addressing the people in the Babylonian exile or those returning from the exile. The words of the prophets sometimes admonishing, sometimes encouraging and comforting, were spoken against the backdrop of concrete political situations surrounding the people of Israel.

Throughout the Hebrew Scripture, we learn who God is through God's dealing with the people of Israel in specific situations. For example, God raised Moses to deliver the Hebrews from the slavery in Egypt and to sustain them in their journey through the wilderness. So, when we hear the language such as redeemed, ransomed, or even "saved," they were often in a literal sense. God's anointed one, the Christ, the Messiah, was to redeem the people of Israel. And that's what John the Baptist was expecting.

Yet, the same Scripture also shows that God's concern was always, from the beginning, for all of God's creation, beyond the House of Jacob. In the saga of God's people Israel, we see God's faithfulness, even when Israel was not faithful, God's passion and enduring love for God's people.

In Jesus, who is also considered a Prophet, we see even more clearly that God's will was, from the very beginning, to reconcile not just the people of Israel but all of God's children. In Jesus, God's saving power is unexpectedly at work in transforming the human condition. In Jesus, we see the focus of God's redemptive work shift from specific historical events to more universal and even cosmic expectations. And it starts with the work of the Holy Spirit within the hearts of humanity.

The renown American psychologist Carl Rogers said, "When I look at the world I'm pessimistic, but when I look at people I am optimistic." Theologian Howard Thurman, who was the mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr. among many other civil rights activists, said "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

What may have appeared to John the Baptist as random acts of kindness was Jesus unexpectedly at work at making people come alive. The winnowing fork Jesus held was being used to remove whatever that deadens the liveliness of our whole being. Jesus came and comes

again to people who lived then and live now with sorrow and sighing, suffering injustice and oppression, the indignity of poverty, or paralyzing grief.

God will save, redeem and ransom them, and us, from whatever life circumstances we are held in, which is our desert, our dry land and wilderness, where joy seems impossible. The words of Isaiah given to us today say, “And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” We are given the glimpse of the wilderness flourishing; it is no longer a place of trial and suffering, but a place of joy and singing.

God’s coming signals a future for those who have given in to hopelessness and sorrow. In God, wilderness becomes not a journey of struggle but of hope and the Advent season rekindles this hope for a way through the wilderness anew each year.

So, if you don’t find yourself feeling all bright and bubbly this Advent season, you are at the right place at the right time; Christmas is for you. Jesus Christ is coming again for you that your heart may know joy again. Can you prepare him room? A room for joy.