

December 7th, 2025

Matthew 11:1-11 “God Is at Work” Advent 2025 Week 2

Last week we talked about John the Baptist’s parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the good news they received from an angel—that after many years of waiting and trying, they would have a child, and they would name him John. This week we find John at the very end of his life, sitting in prison for publicly criticizing Herod Antipas. This isn’t Herod the client king we met last week. This isn’t the Herod we read about in Jesus’ birth story. This is his son Antipas. After his father Herod the Great died, Rome divided that territory among several of his sons—those he hadn’t executed at least. Antipas was given authority over Galilee and Perea. You might be wondering, “Was Antipas any better than his ridiculously brutal father?” Not really. Like his father, he was overly ambitious, obsessed with his own image, enamored with the perks of power, and just as corrupt if not more so. Antipas wasn’t going to tolerate anyone who challenged him, especially someone as influential as John the Baptizer.

So what was the big deal? Well, John had confronted Antipas for marrying Herodias, who had been the wife of his half-brother Philip. John said, “That violates Jewish Law buddy, and you’re the one who’s supposed to be *protecting* our traditions under Roman rule!” That was enough to land him in jail. Herodias, however, wanted *more* than silences, she wanted revenge. During Antipas’s birthday celebration, her daughter (traditionally called Salome) at her mother’s urging publicly asked for John’s head on a platter—and Antipas granted the request.

So here is John, rotting in a prison cell and cut off from the very movement he helped begin. Usually when we talk about John during Advent, we focus on how he was “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,” quoting Isaiah 40:3. All four gospels use that phrase. John *was* the one who was shouting about the coming of the Messiah, but now his voice has been silenced. Now he’s in a dark cell sending

messengers to Jesus with a question: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” The same man who baptized Jesus and proclaimed him the Lamb of God isn’t sure anymore -- at least he isn’t able to see the fulfillment from his prison cell. He doesn’t ask for a miracle, he asks whether his life’s work meant anything. This question comes from a deep place of fear. And remember: this Advent we’re talking about the power of hope over fear. But it’s hard to hope when you’re behind bars.

How many times do we feel imprisoned by our own anxieties or fears? How often do we ask, “Have my efforts made any difference? Is God really at work here or anywhere? Does *any* of this matter?” I think we ask these questions both individually and collectively. I know I’m not the only one who wrestles with imposter syndrome. Many of us feel like we’re just along for the ride, and any good thing that happens to us is just blind luck. And when things fall apart, it reinforces our fears of inadequacy. We’ll say, “See? I told you. I’m not all that. I’m just a wanna-be. Nothing special here.” And eventually someone – maybe a family member or a friend comes along and says, “Don’t be so hard on yourself! You know better!” Sometimes even well-meaning reassurance can make us feel even worse, right?

But notice how Jesus responds to John. He doesn’t chastise him or lecture him. He doesn’t say, “John, come on—you should know better.” Instead, he tells the messenger, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

Neither does Jesus say, “Oh, don’t you worry buddy! I’m going to go out there and do my messiah thing! I’m going to rally the people, gather the hosts of heaven, kick the Romans out of Judea and restore the glory of Israel!” No, he points to quiet signs of transformation. He doesn’t hand John certainty and give him what he wants to hear. He invites him to perceive God at work. It’s a reorientation of Isaiah’s vision that Lori read in our first scripture:

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19a)

The empire is still intact. Herod Antipas still reigns. John will remain imprisoned. But Jesus insists that God’s dream *is* unfolding. Jesus is saying, “Look again. Listen. Perceive.” What *seems* powerful in this moment really isn’t. Jesus performs acts of healing that meet human needs, and he frames *those things* as evidence of God’s reign at work. Not Caesar’s reign or Herod’s reign, but an alternative kingdom that’s *not* marked by coercion or fear. God’s reign is all about healing, liberation, and *hope*.

I’ve probably said this a million times, but the word gospel means “good news.” In our time, we have so many sources of news. We can turn on our TVs after dinner and get our local news and after that, we find out what’s going on in the rest of the world from ABC, CBS, FOX, or NBC. Or if that’s not enough, we can tune into cable news networks and get all sorts of details about what’s happening here and abroad. We can pick up a newspaper at the grocery store, or we can look at newsfeeds on our computers or phones. We basically have access to news 24 hours a day from both professional journalists, or just average citizens with a strong opinion and no credentials who post on social media. Back in Jesus’ day, the Romans employed heralds, official messengers who would announce the gospel (or “the good news”) to communities. An example might be something like, “Good news! A decree from Caesar benefits this province!” Or, “Good news! Rome has won a major battle!” These heralds were part of the Roman propaganda machine, and the gospel they spread always shined a spotlight on the good things the emperor was doing for everyone under Rome’s rule.

There are four books in the New Testament that we call “gospels” – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They are about the life, work, mission, and purpose of Jesus’ ministry on earth. Here in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is lifted up not as a new Caesar, but an agent of God’s redemptive

transformation of the world. As the Messiah, Jesus isn't coming in to miraculously win battles or stage coups against the government as the people and his cousin John expected. Jesus wants to make it clear that the Messiah's agenda is much more subtle. The miracles that he performs meet very real human needs.

But notice, Jesus makes it clear that John *has* made a difference. John *has* played an important part in the coming of God's kingdom. "I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

For those who are in prison today—literally or metaphorically—this passage offers both comfort and challenge. Hope in the gospel is not grounded in outcomes or visible success. Hope is rooted in perception—in trusting that God is still at work, even when it looks like things will never change and even when prophets die behind bars. See what I'm saying here? John's question echoes across generations. If you are engaged in proclaiming the good news of Jesus, and it doesn't seem like anything is going to change, know this: The fear that nothing has changed, the grief that our lives might not have mattered, the silence from the people or institutions we hoped would transform things – *none* of it matters. God is and always will be at work and hope will always be able to overcome fear. Yeah, but if someone like John who bore witness to what Jesus was doing is having doubts, how do you expect us to be hopeful after 2,000 years of watching the failures of human-made institutions? Listen, even in doubt, John is still a prophet. Even in fear, he is still beloved.

Advent does not require us to manufacture hope. It invites *us* to bring our emptied hope to Jesus, to ask the hard questions, and to listen again for signs of God's nearness and evidence of God's work. Uh-oh, Jesse said the "q" word. What questions do you have for us to ponder this week pastor? Here you go: When we are running out of hope, it may be the perfect time to ask: What do you see? What do you hear? And after

asking those questions have faith that somewhere, even now, something new is springing forth.

So as we step into another week of Advent, may we trust that God is already moving in places we cannot yet see. Even when hope feels thin and our questions feel heavy, Christ's quiet work continues. And if we dare to look and listen again, we just might notice the first small signs of God's new thing breaking in.