

**Year A: Advent 3b Is 35:1-10; Ps 146:4-9; Jas 5:7-10; Mt 11:2-11**  
**St. Barnabas, Florissant – December 15, 2019**

**Focus Sentence:** We have to look beyond the prison walls of our own doubts and fears in order to recognize Jesus as our Messiah.

**I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

There's a phrase, tucked away in this morning's responsorial Psalm, that provides the basis for the Advent HOPE we've been talking about the past two Sundays of this season. "[God] keeps his promise forever." Without that assurance, there really is no hope, and there's no sense to this season of Advent. Our hope rests firmly in God, and NOT in rulers, NOT in any child of this earth.

**PAUSE**

The Psalmist's words are no doubt testing John the Baptist, as he sits in his dark prison cell. John made his appearance on our Advent stage last Sunday, where we saw him at the height of his popularity, preaching to huge crowds, and pointing towards the Messiah, who will be coming *very* soon.

But this morning, we find John the Baptist languishing in Herod's dungeon, unable to continue his preaching and baptizing ministry at the Jordan River. And apparently, we find John struggling with some doubts about that "God who keeps his promise forever."

Remember that John was announcing the *immediacy* of the Kingdom of God, proclaiming that the One, the Messiah, is coming SOON and he "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." The ONE is coming, we might read between the lines, who will begin the Messianic age of peace, and of joy, and of blooming deserts, and freedom, and love RIGHT NOW!

But now, John comes face to face with his doubts and (maybe) disappointments. This Jesus, by whom John originally thought HE needed to be baptized, this Jesus, ...well, maybe he isn't the Messiah John anticipated. John is forced to reflect and reexamine the basis for his hope.

## PAUSE

So John sends some disciples to question Jesus bluntly: "Are you or aren't you?" "Are you the ONE who is to come, or should we be looking for another?" Are you really the ONE sent by God to fulfill all those Messianic promises, or should we just admit that we've been disappointed and led astray by yet one more impostor?

Jesus responds to John by asking John's disciples to tell him what they see and hear, and to dare to hold that vision up alongside the promises written about by Isaiah. And probably not by accident does Jesus leave out that part of Isaiah, chapter 61, that refers to prisoners being set free.

Will John be able to recognize in what his disciples do see and hear Jesus doing that this Jesus really IS the Messiah, even if Jesus doesn't set *this particular prisoner* of Herod's free? Can John be trusted not to take offence at this Messiah? After all, God did rescue Jeremiah from a well, where he was being imprisoned. Why not rescue John from Herod's prison?

## PAUSE

John the Baptist's story, I believe, challenges each of us to live with hope in the face of disappointment and disorientation. Is our faithfulness, our trust, our hanging in there, for real, or is it just based on those times when we feel good about God?

How do we understand our particular stories in the light of God's story, especially when the two stories don't seem to touch at all? ...when there's an elusiveness to God's ways with us, and those ways don't come close to matching our expectations?

Can we step outside the prison walls into which we put our expectations and let God "strengthen our weak hands and make firm our feeble knees," and hear deep down in our hearts God's call to be strong and trusting, and not be afraid, because our God really is coming to save us?

## **PAUSE**

It's fairly easy to "be faithful," to "hang in there," during those times when the wilderness and the dry land are glad, filled with crocus blossoms, when the desert seems to rejoice. And, thanks be to God, for those times when we're lifted up and delightfully surprised by the wonderful works of God in our lives.

But what about those other times we know will come along? What about those times when every hope we have for our lives seems doomed to destruction? What about those times when the desert isn't blooming, but is filled with the burning sand of disappointment and the bitterness of failure?

God is, after all, the God of both situations. Abundance and joy are no more a sign of God's presence than are turmoil and desolation, since God is quite able to switch them at will.

Can we manage to stay put in the wilderness of disappointment, of ambiguity and paradox, long enough to discover that God really IS here also? ...so that we can echo Jacob's awed words: "God is in this place and I, I didn't know it"?

## **PAUSE**

In the wilderness, we lose control over everything that shapes our lives, and we can be open to God's timeline, to God's ways. Like John the Baptist, sitting in Herod's prison cell, we can discover --- even when we don't want to --- how to be patient until the coming of the Lord.

## PAUSE

Although I seem to be getting slightly better at it as I get older, patience has never been one of my strong points. My prayer has all too often been that one that goes like this: "God, please give me patience, and I want it *right now!*" Like John the Baptist, filled with excitement at the prospect of a Messianic age right around the corner, our impatience *increases* our doubts and questioning.

And yet, I believe that, if we can just be quiet in our hearts long enough, we can discover that God still carves out highways in the desert and turns the wilderness into a place of wonder, and life, and beauty, even though none of it turns out to be exactly what we expected.

## PAUSE

In the end, today's Gospel reading asks whether John the Baptist, despite his doubts and seeming disappointments, can hold on to the longing for God and the waiting that are at the heart of Advent's unsettling message and discover in their midst the mystery of God's presence? ...mystery that has to be lived into, and not just explained? ...mystery that *transforms* rather than simply *informs*? Advent presents each of us with the same question: can we dare to go into our wilderness and risk exploring the meaning of our longing for God? ...and of God's *unfailing* promises? I pray this morning that we can, and that we will!

**AMEN.**