

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 21, 2025
9:30 AM

Text: Matthew 11:2-15

Theme: Prepare the Way for the Lord: The Forerunner of Christ

[prayer]

“Are you the one who is to come?” (v. 3) John’s question of Jesus has always struck me as odd. Surely John already knows Jesus is the Messiah? Presumably his mother, Elizabeth, told him the story of being six months pregnant with him when Mary came to visit, newly pregnant with God’s Son. “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, [John] leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you [Mary] among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb’” (Luke 1:41-42 NRSVUE). Elizabeth prophesied that the infant Jesus was the one to come. Yet here John is, speculating, questioning, doubting.

It is an odd look for this once bold prophet, who only a few chapters ago seemed so sure of himself. At this point in Matthew’s gospel, John has been preaching for at least a year, urging people to be baptized in preparation for the Day of the Lord. He even baptized Jesus! He saw the Holy Spirit descend; he heard the voice of God say, “This is my Son” (Matt 3:17 CEB).

I do not think John’s question is about facts. He knows what he has seen and heard and experienced. What he wants to know is whether he can *trust* it all. He wants to know whether he can trust Jesus.

John’s question is a question of faltering faith. It is the same question we all ask at some point in our lives: *Can I trust God to keep His promises? When all evidence points to the contrary, can I trust Him to still do as He has said? Can I trust Him to be who He has said He will be?*

After a wildly successful ministry, John finds himself imprisoned in the desert fortress at Machaerus, not far from where he was baptizing people. He was imprisoned for doing what all good prophets do: He spoke truth to power and power did not like what he had to say. The ruler of Judea at this point in John's story was Herod Antipas and he wanted to live above the law. He coveted his brother's wife, Herodias, so he divorced his first wife and married Herodias instead. John wasn't going to ignore the immorality of Herod's behavior just because Herod was a king. He expected people to repent and that included Herod. Herod responded by throwing John into prison.

If you know the rest of the story, recall that it ends with John's head on a platter at Herod's birthday party. So, the John the Baptist we meet in chapter eleven of Matthew's gospel is in very different circumstances from the John the Baptist of chapter three. The prison walls are closing in on him and with them the darkness of a spiritual crisis.

Part of that spiritual crisis is Jesus himself. The fiery judgment John expected the Messiah to bring has not materialized. Instead, the "deeds of Christ" have been acts of compassion and peace. This is not what John expected, and where expectation is confounded, doubt finds a toehold.

In our pride we easily fall into the trap of treating doubt like a moral deficiency. But Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber, reflecting recently on her own dark night of the soul, writes, "I don't think John is doubting Jesus because John has weak moral character. He's not weak, he's just alone and suffering and time has slowed down enough for his thoughts to get cruel...He's just doubting because when life takes a devastating turn, nothing makes sense anymore and so we try and force it to by coming up with our own twisted conclusions."¹

The conclusion John comes to is maybe Jesus is *not* the one to come. Perhaps the Messiah is still coming. But to hedge his bets, John dispatches a few of his own disciples to question Jesus. "Hey Jesus, I'm sitting here in prison after doing what I was supposed to do. Give me some assurance that it wasn't all for nothing."

Jesus's response is completely in character: He does not answer John's question directly. Instead, he points to the evidence. And the evidence is this: The blind can

¹ <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/the-case-for-spiritual-pto>

see; the crippled are walking; people with skin diseases are healed and restored to community; the deaf can hear; the dead are raised up; and the poor have been given hope.

These deeds of restoration and redemption, of peace and shalom, of new life breaking through are the signs of the Messianic age that the prophets of old promised (cf. Isa 35:5-6; 42:18). If John takes offense at these signs because they do not conform to popular messianic expectations, then he has fundamentally misunderstood God's kingdom.

Still, Jesus's words are not a condemnation of his cousin. They are meant to encourage him. "Blessed are those who do not see but believe." I keep a little cross-stitched sign above my desk that says *Who plants a seed beneath the sod and waits to see believes in God*. Part of discipleship is planting seeds of hope, love, joy, and peace that we may not get to see bear fruit. From his prison cell, John cannot see all the evidence of God's kingdom breaking through, but that does not mean it does not exist. The story spinning in John's head is a story of failure, but the King of the Universe tells him otherwise. Here are the fruits of his labor – changed hearts and changed lives. Jesus's ministry doesn't exist without John. John has been his forerunner. He made a highway for the Lord through the desert, and now the desert flowers are in bloom. God is on the move.

John's question resonates with all of us who struggle with doubt, who were once sure of our faith but now have questions of our own. As we approach the end of 2025, we look back on another year where cruelty and evil were on full display, even celebrated. You may be wondering: Does following the way of Jesus, the way of compassion and non-violence, really make a difference? Where are the fruits of our labor? Does God see all this suffering? Does God care?

To these questions Jesus says, *Blessed are you who ask, who knock, who keep searching, who keep laboring. The kingdom of God belongs to you*. Not to those who never doubt, but to those who keep working despite their doubt, who keep preparing the way for the Lord in the face of insurmountable odds. John may waver in his faith, but this is part of the nature of discipleship. Faith must constantly be renewed, and we renew it best through action, through the deeds of Christ we faithfully perform, sowing and planting the kingdom of God. I am

reminded of what was said to John Wesley in his dark night of his soul: “Preach faith until you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.”²

And when we cannot renew our faith through action, it is renewed through the action of others. Rev. Bolz Weber continues, “It’s important to notice that Jesus doesn’t shame [John] for his doubts, nor does Jesus spiritually bypass John’s despair by offering him some sort of positive vibes only nonsense. Jesus just sends messengers to tell John what they see and hear. Even John the Baptist, in his own bleak midwinter of the soul, needed the faith of others. Martin Luther called this the *mutual consolation of the saints*.”³

It is not Jesus alone but the “deeds of Christ” done by Jesus’s disciples that restore John to faith. Likewise, it is our witness, as the living body of Christ, the community of faith, that has the power to shine a light into the darkness of others. It is our deeds of compassion, peace, and justice on Christ’s behalf that have the power to restore hope to a world seeking comfort and consolation.

That witness will meet opposition. In the case of John, it was met with beheading, and in the case of Jesus it was met with execution on a cross. We will wonder whether we are making a difference, whether our labor for the kingdom of God is worth it. I say to you, church: It is okay to wonder, but don’t ever stop laboring. The seeds of God’s kingdom that we faithfully plant are germinating in the dark. Today, on the shortest day of the year, remember that the earth even now is tilting back toward the light. What makes seeds grow? Sunshine and water. The dawn from on high is breaking upon us, and God has promised that at the end of time we will reap a harvest of righteousness.

In October 1979, Catholic Cardinal John Dearden preached a mass in memory of deceased priests. It included a prayer composed by Bishop Ken Untener that has come to be known as “The Romero Prayer,” for Bishop Oscar Romero who planted the seeds of peace and justice in a time of deep darkness in his home country of El Salvador. He was martyred at the altar in 1980 before he could enjoy the fruits of his labor. If you are feeling tired or discouraged in your faith, I offer this prayer to you as a word of encouragement.

² <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xi.html>

³ <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/the-case-for-spiritual-pto>

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.⁴

Keep preparing the way for the Lord, friends. God is on the move.

Amen.

⁴ <https://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/romero-prayer/>