

**Sermon: Jesus & John the Baptist**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

25 June 2023

Based on **Jeremiah 20:7-13; Matthew 11:1-19**

Our two readings today are unrelated. The Jeremiah passage is part of the lectionary's assigned readings for the day, and the Gospel reading was chosen especially because we are celebrating John the Baptist.

But two lines from Jeremiah caught my eye and we should mention them briefly. Jeremiah heard many whispering “‘Terror is all around!’ Denounce him!’ As far as I know, this is the only place in the Bible where terror is personified, so of course I had to check it out.

At the beginning of the chapter, Jeremiah is talking about – really complaining about – a priest named Pashur who was the chief officer of the Temple, sort of the chief of police.

Pashur heard Jeremiah prophesying the disaster about to come to Jerusalem because the people refused to hear the word of the LORD. In his anger, Pashur struck Jeremiah and put him in the stocks for a day.

Jeremiah said to him, “The LORD has named you not Pashur but ‘Terror-all-around.’ For thus says the LORD I am making you a terror to yourself and to all your friends” (20:3-4).

Turns out it's Pashur against whom many were whispering. When Jeremiah proclaims judgement, he doesn't fool around.

But, he said, “The LORD is with me like a dread warrior.” So, look out.

Getting back to the Gospel, just to catch you up, the past few weeks, we've been talking about how Jesus has been offering instruction to his disciples to prepare them for their first mission trip. Today, if we had followed the lectionary, we would have heard the last of these instructions but, since the passage we heard instead immediately follows all of that, and, as it is John the Baptist Sunday, we skipped ahead a few verses.

In Matthew's Gospel, John is prominent in chapters 3 & 11, and he is mentioned here and there in the chapters in between.

In chapter three, Matthew tells us that 'In those days, John the Baptist came,' fully formed and from out of nowhere. He proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Matthew also tells us what kind of clothing John wore, and what he ate, things he never mentions about Jesus. John tells the people, "I baptize you with water for repentance," but after him would come one who is more powerful and who will "baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:11).

We've seen all this come true in the post-Easter season and on Pentecost.

John is important to the story as both the *foreshadower* and *forerunner* of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The way the crowds and the Jewish religious leaders react to John foreshadows how they will react to Jesus. And as forerunner, John prepares the way for Jesus, fulfilling the Scripture proclaimed by Isaiah.

But John has a problem: he's in prison and his faith seems a little shaky.

John had baptized Jesus and knew that Jesus was superior to himself. But now, he's wondering about the things about Jesus that he's heard in prison. Through Jesus, 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. John wondered if these were the things the Messiah should be doing.

Good question. When God's ways do not match our expectations, do we, like John, wonder about God? If God is a God of love, why is the world in such a mess? If God is a dread warrior, why do oppression and injustice still exist? Are we following the right God, or should we wait for another?

John asked a simple yes-or-no question and Jesus gave him a typical answer, but we never hear a response from John.

Jesus assured John and his followers that what they saw and heard about him was in fact God bringing salvation to the world – but in God's own way and in God's own time.<sup>2</sup> Maybe prison has altered John's perception. Maybe he can't see beyond the walls of his cell. Maybe he needs to look beyond his situation.

Is Jesus the one who is to come? The Gospel says yes. As Christ followers ourselves, we say yes too. And does that mean all is well? Not really.

The Gospel is not about avoiding tragedy. Both John and Jesus died in horrible ways. Following Jesus is not always easy, either, especially in some countries around the world.

John prepared the way and Jesus walked the path with us. We have a part to play in caring for the poor, the sick, and the downtrodden. Do that, and Wisdom is indeed vindicated by her deeds.

But doing what Jesus did ain't easy.

We support the local food pantry and several other outreach ministries. They each require some effort, financially and materially. They're sustainable only if we think they're important enough to support, and they are. But beyond that, only with compassion can we care for the poor, the sick, and the downtrodden. We can't pay anyone's rent or mortgage for them. We do feed people pretty well, but not every day – that's beyond our capabilities as a church.

In today's Gospel reading, Matthew gives us some truths about Jesus and about John, and he tells us how 'this generation' responded to them, which is to say, not well. God's messengers were both rejected. One wonders why.

John's message might have been too much – he demanded repentance. We might want him to lighten up a bit, yet people flocked to him to confess and be baptized, so something was working for him. And he makes a good point – we have to decide whether or not to embrace God's vision for humanity as our own.

Jesus thinks everyone can be saved. Experience tells us that we can only do so much. Maybe, like John, we need to see beyond our own situations.

At the end of Flannery O'Connor's novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (the title of which came from verse 12), a little girl says, "God was angry with the world because it always wanted more. It wanted as much as God had and it didn't know what God had but it wanted it and more."<sup>3</sup>

We think the little girl was mistaken. God is not angry because we *want* more. God set a high bar and, by God's grace, God can't wait for us to go for it.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Janice Capel Anderson, *Matthew's Narrative Web: Over, and Over, and Over Again* (England: Sheffield Academic, 1994) 172.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa M. Bowens, "The Role of John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel" *Word & World*, volume 30, no. 3. Summer 2010, 317.

<sup>3</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1960).