

JOHN THE MESSENGER

A SERMON FOR ADVENT III
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 11:2-19

Matthew wrote his gospel for readers who were steeped in the Old Testament. More than any other gospel, his attempts to tie everything that Jesus said and did and was to an Old Testament prophecy. Not even the most obscure reference to the Messiah escapes Matthew's attention, and he does his best to document that Jesus came to fulfill all of the prophecies that all of the prophets of old uttered in anticipation of the coming of the Christ into the world.

Some of the Jews at the time of Christ didn't expect just one Messiah. They expected two. They expected a second Elijah who would come to announce the coming of the true Messiah, whom some of them saw as the second Moses, and others as the second David.

The second Elijah would be the messenger, and the Messiah who would be the second Moses, the second Law Giver, would bring the New Covenant foretold by Jeremiah, when God's law would be written on human hearts, and not on tablets of stone.

Of course, those who anticipated the coming of a second David looked forward to the overthrow of the Herods, false kings over Judah, and the Romans, conquerors and oppressors of God's people.

Here, in Matthew 11, Jesus tells his hearers that John is a prophet, and more than a prophet, John is that messenger that is the sign that the Messiah is coming. And Jesus tells them that John is the Elijah who is to come.

Jesus never really comes out and says, "I am the Messiah." He never calls Himself the Son of God. He is content to use that awkward device that simply means a man to call himself the Son of Man.

But He tells them, "Let anyone who has ears, listen."

And then Jesus comments on His hearers, on the generation to which He speaks. He compares and contrasts the way that John came and that He has come, and the rejection and criticism that they both have been subjected to.

How strange it must seem to us to have Jesus considered a glutton and a drunkard. We know that He was a friend of tax collectors and sinners, and we can rejoice in that good news, for we are sinners whom He has befriended.

John the Messenger was rejected by the religious leaders of his day, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, until finally he drew the attention of King Herod, and in fact, insulted King Herod's wife, Herodias, whom John said Herod had no right to marry.

That is why John was in prison at the time of the story that is our text this morning. He had insulted the wife of the king. And she wanted John dead, not just in jail. That his insult was the truth has nothing to do with it.

Did John doubt? John was the baby that leapt in his mother's womb when a pregnant Mary came near. John had baptized Jesus in the River Jordan, saying that he was not worthy to do so. He had seen the Holy Spirit descend like a dove, and had heard the voice of God saying "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

And yet John could ask, "Are you the one, or must we wait for another?" Perhaps John knew his time was running out. Perhaps he heard the musicians tuning their instruments, to play the song to which Salome would dance. Perhaps he heard the jailer sharpening the sword that would lop off his head. Perhaps he saw the butler polishing the silver platter upon which his head would be presented. Perhaps John knew that the end of his life was coming, and wanted to know that his message had been true, that his ministry had not been in vain.

And the word that Jesus sends to John is true: 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.

Miracles are happening, John. The gospel is being preached, John. Your work is done. Well done, good and faithful messenger.

And yet the people did not believe. They masses were not satisfied. The nay-sayers and nit-pickers continued to point out the flaws and the imperfections in the ones who followed Jesus.

Nearly twenty centuries have passed since John brought his message to the banks of the Jordan, and so little has changed. There are still folks who do not believe. There are still folks who are not satisfied. There are still folks who point out the flaws and the imperfections of those of us who follow Jesus in the present age.

But Jesus says that wisdom is vindicated by her deeds, and that those who take no offense at Him are blessed.

And those who believe in Him are saved.

And to Jesus Christ, the Son of Man and Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ, be the glory, the power, the dominion and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more. Amen.