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Matthew 11,2-11

Advent 3 — 13 December 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson from the Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew, which was read earlier:

Now when John in prison heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, ³ and said to Him, “Are You the Coming One, or shall we look for someone else?”

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: One of our great hymns begins, “O Lord, how shall I meet Thee, | How welcome Thee aright?” [TLH 58]. But I have a sneaking suspicion that this great hymn by Paul Gerhardt (written in 1653) is not one of the tunes that these days is being pumped through the loud speakers at malls or played on one of those radio stations that is now all Christmas music all the time.

With less than two weeks to Christmas, I am sure many people are full of expectations – expectations for what they are going to receive at Christmas. Children especially are waiting. They are waiting to see if their wish lists are going to be fulfilled. Parents are in stores looking for that special gift, although I do not think that this Christmas there is that one special gift people are actually fighting over. Adults also can agonize over what to buy.

But this is a season of expectation, of waiting, of looking. When we unwrap our presents at Christmas will we be pleasantly surprised at what we receive or disappointed? Will we think, “That is the perfect gift for me” or will be in line at the exchange counter to find something more suitable?

In a sense, not so many years after that first Christmas in Bethlehem, John the Baptizer, or his disciples, or both, had some questions that had to do with the One Whom God sent to the earth. God had sent Jesus. About thirty years after that first Christmas, John had announced to all who would hear that Jesus was “the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1,29). But now John’s disciples have questions. We’ll look at these questions, Jesus’ response, and our response. This brings me to my sermon theme for today, “**Should We Wait For Another?**” I’ll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Unmet Expectations**
- 2) The Perfect Gift; and,**
- 3) There is No Other**

1) Unmet Expectations. John the Baptist’s life was one of preparation. He was appointed by God to prepare the way for the Messiah. He was the one who was to point to Jesus. Indeed, John baptized Jesus, even though John said that it was Jesus who should be baptizing him (Matthew 3,14). After baptizing Jesus, John continued to preach repentance

Less than a year after John had baptized Jesus, however, John was thrown into prison by Herod Antipas (Matthew 14,3-5; Mark 6,17-20; Luke 3,19-20), who was the ruler of Galilee and Perea and one of the sons of Herod the Great. John had preached against Herod marrying his brother’s wife, which was against Old Testament Law (Leviticus 18,16; 20,21). John also condemned Herod Antipas for “all the wicked things which Herod had done” (Luke 3,19). Josephus, a Jewish historian, who wrote after the

destruction of Jerusalem, adds that Herod imprisoned John because Herod feared that John was going to lead a rebellion against him.

Some mixture of both is probably correct. First, John certainly condemned Herod's moral shortcomings. Second, John had about him a number of disciples and others who followed him around. Third, John was tremendously popular with the people. Fourth, In Herod's mind and according to the political thinking of the day, there was little difference between moral condemnation and political condemnation.

Herod had John imprisoned in his mountain fortress in Machaerus, which was in southern Perea and east of the Dead Sea. Herod frequently visited this fortress. It seems that John could have visitors and even Herod had John brought to him so he could speak with him.

After John was in prison for about nine months, John sent some of His disciples to Jesus. Both before and after Jesus' Baptism, John preached a strong message that the people should repent.

John was pointing to Jesus. Of Jesus, John said,

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand and He will thoroughly clean His threshing floor; and the wheat He will gather into the barn, but He will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3,11b-12).

For John and his disciples, however, things did not look good. Where was this fire-breathing Messiah? John had seen the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus. Where was this Messiah? Where was the fire? Where was the cleansing, the throwing of the chaff into the fire? After all, it seems that some were expecting the Messiah to throw the chaff like Herod into the fire; but instead of Herod burning, it was John himself who was languishing in prison.

To put it mildly, people were disappointed. It was like a child waiting for a special toy for Christmas and instead getting socks. But Jesus knew what He was doing. For in Jesus Himself God has sent

2) The Perfect Gift. John sent His disciples to Jesus to ask a Jesus a question: “Are You the coming One, or do we look for another?”

Over the centuries theologians have asked the question whether it was John who had doubts concerning Jesus’ ministry or whether it was his disciples who had doubts. Luther argues that John had no doubts but sent his disciples to Jesus so that the disciples’ doubts would be taken away. Perhaps we can say that John had no doubts about who Jesus was, but that he had doubts about what Jesus was doing – after all, there is a difference. Was this the way the Messiah was supposed to act?

To put all the doubts to rest, regardless of who had them, Jesus answered the question:

Go and report to John the things which you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me. (vv 4-6)

To anyone who heard Jesus, they would know that He was referring to various Old Testament texts which told of what the Messiah would do. Thus, Isaiah has many things to say about the coming Messiah:

And on that day the deaf shall hear words of a book,
And out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.
(Isaiah

and

Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.
⁶ And then the lame will leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy.
For waters will break forth in the wilderness
And streams in the Arabah [or, desert]. (Isaiah 35,5-6)

and

Hear, you deaf!
And look, you blind, that you may see.
⁷ To open blind eyes,
To bring out prisoners from the dungeon. (Isaiah 42,18+7)

and

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me,
Because the LORD has anointed Me —
To bring Good News to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives,
And freedom to prisoners. (Isaiah 61,1)

and

Your dead will live;
Their corpses will rise.
You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy,
For your dew is as the dew of the dawn,
And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits. (Isaiah 26,19)

While these were mighty works of power, they seemingly did not meet the expectations of John or his disciples. John wanted the Messiah to immediately begin His reign here on earth with what we would call overturning society. Others might call it revolution.

But Jesus was overturning society, but not according to John's expectations. In all of these mighty deeds – giving the blind sight, healing the palsied limbs of the lame, cleansing lepers, and even raising the dead – there is something greater going on that meets the eye.

Jesus' idea of overturning society was centered in His mighty works. All of the healings and teachings which Jesus did had a purpose. In that list of miracles Jesus was removing the impediments which prevented God's people from worshiping Him correctly.

For example, the lepers, the lame and the blind could not worship in the temple. The poor had their worship restricted because they had to buy their sacrifices from those who sold animals in the courtyards of the Temple. The religious leaders thought all who were so afflicted had been cursed by God. Jesus was saying that God was coming to them in the person of Jesus even in the midst of their affliction. In His works, Jesus was showing that healing and forgiveness are the same. As Jesus said to His critics: "What is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Take up your mat and walk'?"

Any fool can take up a sword and begin hacking away at society's injustices. For a while that can even be very satisfying, and there are Scriptural passages that can provide some justification for that kind of activity. But to put any lime-minded impulses into their proper perspective, Jesus said, "For all who take up the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26,52).

It is far more difficult to begin change on a one-by-one basis. But that is what Jesus did. He reached out to individuals by healing and

preaching. He was forgiving and including. Finally He went up to Jerusalem, where He was condemned and died. On the Cross He took on the sins of the world. He died so that we might be forgiven, might be included in God's family of faith, might be bought back from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Jesus rose from the dead on the third day so that we and all others might have certainty that indeed

3) There is No Other. Jesus told John's disciples what it was He was about, and by telling them, He said, "There is no other." As Jesus said elsewhere:

I am the Way, the Truth, and the Light; no one comes to the Father except through Me. (John 14,6)

In this Christmas season there are many who are still looking and waiting and seemingly want toys instead of socks.

Muslims, for example, believe that if one submits perfectly to God – and the very word Islam means "submission" – God will come to them. Buddhists believe that the world is an illusion and that through personal navel-gazing – or meditation – one will find oneness with the cosmos. Hindus believe that God can be in everything, and one can find a way to God through worshiping snakes, rats, elephants, you name it, even Jesus, but only along with a host of other things. There are many Christian churches who have forgotten about sin and forgiveness and a bodily resurrection and have put the title of Master of Social Work behind Jesus' name and feel God's kingdom will come on earth only if enough adjustments can be made in society.

The biggest challenge, however, is always to look for He Who comes with the one needful thing: forgiveness.

The world would give us Santa Claus. All of know the words to the song: You better be good, | You better be nice, | I'm telling you

once, | I'm telling you twice, | Santa Claus is coming to town.” No goodness, no toys; maybe a lump of coal.

But while we were yet sinners – not too nice a thought – Jesus came to die for us. But then He rose and lives with us. He still lives and comes to comfort the lonely, the sick, the poor. He brings comfort by strengthening us through forgiveness. This forgiveness let the early Church revolutionize society. The church did it by caring and comforting the sick and the lonely; both physically and spiritually, to let them know that they are not alone and God is with them, they are included in God's family. We are a family gathered in Baptism and strengthened by the Word and by the true Body and Blood of the Lord. It is because Christ has reached out to us that we can reach out to others.

In this Advent season there is no other – only Jesus.

Conclusion. The days are getting shorter, both in sun light as well as until Christmas. What can be a better present than the love which Jesus has first shown us. This is the most important thing we can bring to our families, that which Jesus first brought to us. This is what Jesus showed to John in prison. In Jesus God has given us the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is the only way to the Father and Jesus is always the best Christmas present ever. There is no other. Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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