

FOCUS: The Good News is that even as we await celebrating the birth of the Christ Child, we await with patience the coming again of our Lord and Savior. (Third in a series)

The late composer Natalie Sleeth, in her anthem “Baby, What You Gonna Be?” asks this question: “Are you the one who was sent to be Master? To bring in the kingdom, too?” In the haunting melody of the song, these words seem to linger in the air longer than they ought. They ask the question of John the Baptist and countless millions of people ever since. “Are you the one, Jesus? Are you the One?”

While the original context for this passage was not messianic, Isaiah’s description of the reign of God, as we heard read this morning, is the source of Jesus’ message back to John. Isaiah wrote: “He will come to save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”¹ God is coming, Isaiah foretells, and things will be different. Miraculously different! That which, to human eyes, appears to be imperfect will be made perfect. The powerless will be made powerful, Isaiah assures the people. In the context of this Advent season, we are reminded of the sinful nature of human beings, and of our frailty and brokenness. Yet at the same time, we are mindful that Christ comes, and with the incarnation of God, transformation is possible. Now we are closer to the coming of the Lord, but still, we are not yet there.

God has always promised to care for the Chosen People. That is a, if not *the*, significant thread of the Hebrew Scriptures. Throughout the history of Israel, God was there to put down the mighty and raise up the lowly. In the Incarnation, God reaches to the lowly—a young maiden named Mary of Nazareth—and lifts her up as the God-bearer, the mother of Jesus. Mary’s hymn of praise is offered in the Magnificat.

But we are still not at the ultimate event of the season, dear sisters and brothers. No, as much as we would like to move forward to the welcoming of the Christ Child, we cannot yet do so. We must, as James writes, “Be patient.” While James is talking to the post-Resurrection community of Jewish Christians, and specifically saying “be patient” for the second coming of Christ, his words are just as applicable to us as we wait not only on the Christmas coming, but on that same second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ as well. And while we are at it, James reminds us, we shouldn’t be “grumbling” or speaking ill of our neighbors. James reminds us that the Lord is coming again, and in his coming, one of the things he will do is judge the people. In this brief passage from James, we hear again, as we await the celebration of the first coming, the promise and expectation of the second coming and the reign of Christ. Once again, we can not ignore the presence and the reality of the Cross, even as we approach the manger. And furthermore, James reminds us, we wait *together*, not alone. To aid us in our collective waiting, to give us strength in the hard times, James reminds us to follow the example of the suffering and patience of the great prophets of the Lord.

And, of course, among those prophets of the Lord we find John the Baptist. John is part of the messianic promise. In Malachi, we hear the promise of God in the oracle, “See, I am sending

¹ Isaiah 35:4c-6 (NRSV)

my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”² Before the Lord can come, there must be the one before who makes things ready. This was the role of John the Baptist.

As we heard last week, crowds of people followed John. They came from all over the region to hear what John had to say. Some chose to follow him as disciples. Others opted to be baptized and repent. Others still simply watched in wonder, awe, or even suspicion. But, through it all, the people were there, in the desert, listening.

So, as John sits in his prison cell, not know what might happen to him, but expecting the worst, perhaps, he sent some of his closest followers to inquire of Jesus if he was truly the One sent from God. And we hear Jesus answer the question with a statement of the facts—with observations of the work of God. While Jesus leaves it to John to determine for himself if Jesus was truly the “one who is to come,” Jesus makes it quite clear that the facts speak for themselves.

And as the disciples of John departed to report back to John the Baptist, Jesus uses the opportunity for a teaching moment. Jesus challenges them by asking “Why did you go out into the desert wilderness? Why did you leave your nice comfortable homes to go out and listen to this prophet? What were you expecting?” These are challenging questions, to be certain. Prophets sent to the Hebrew people tended to be ignored and often ridiculed. Prophets throughout history generally told the leaders and people things which they didn’t want to hear. Yet at this time in the history of the Hebrew people, there were crowds who went *out* to see this prophet in the wilderness. No doubt about it, John was a different breed of character. He didn’t wear nice robes and live in a cushy palace or temple apartment. Rather, his camel hair coat and leather belt and rough appearance set him apart from almost every one else around him. Then Jesus answers the questions to the people himself. “You went out to see a prophet, folks!” And more than that, the people went out to see *the* prophet for whom they had been waiting centuries. They heard the prophet who was to come before the coming of the Lord. The one who was to prepare the way of the Lord.

Few people gathered with Jesus realized that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. While they traveled with him, listened to him, and saw the works he performed, they didn’t quite get it. And likewise, those who had been following John the Baptist were not fully aware of his important role in human history. So, John, feeling certain that Jesus was indeed the one, sent his disciples to get first-hand confirmation. And in their questioning of Jesus, they offered Jesus the opportunity to provide the witness to Scripture for the people. The signs were there, my friends, to point to the fulfillment of Scripture. Now is the time of the Lord, Jesus was telling John and those who were gathered. But at the same time, that time was not yet brought to its conclusion. The way still needed to be prepared.

And Jesus told the people that followed and listened to John that John the Baptist, the rough-edged prophet of the Lord who wandered, lived, and taught in the desert, was a great man in their midst. This apparently lowly follower of the Lord was, in reality, the greatest of all people born of a woman. He may not have been the greatest to look at, and his message may not have been the most enjoyable, comfortable, or even most politically correct for the times, but John the Baptist was the greatest.

² Malachi 3:1

The time of the Lord approaches, but it is not yet here. Even as we see the wax of a third Advent candle melt away, signaling the coming of the Christmas festival, it is not yet time to shout out “Gloria!” We so much want to celebrate, even as we see the subtle transformation of our homes and worship space as we prepare for the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child. But still, it is not yet time. And, just as we anxiously await the coming of Christmas, we anxiously await the second coming of our Lord. We await the time when all nations will bow at the name of Jesus. We await the time when peace will reign among all the peoples. We await the time when the lowly will be lifted up and the poor will be made wealthy.

We continue to wait. We continue to prepare. In the midst of the hustle and bustle of the secular world, we gather here and in our homes to prepare for the one who is to come. We wait in anticipation for the one who is to come—Emmanuel—God with us.