

**Matthew 11:2-12 (NRSV)**

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.'

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

---

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

I have been heard to complain that I had said all that I had to say about John the Baptist. But not today. The Gospel always retains its capacity to surprise us and today's Gospel lesson is a prime example. Today's Gospel lesson shows us a new side of John.

We know John as a blustery wild man, ready, even anxious to judge this generation, this brood of vipers as he says. John's hand is on the ax and the ax is poised at the root of the tree. John

is ready to chop down the tree and throw it in the fire. Doubt hardly seems to be part of his emotional repertoire.

In “The Last Temptation of Christ” Nikos Kazantzakis imagines a conversation between Jesus and John, after Jesus’ baptism. He writes, “All night long the two of them had held the world in their hands, deliberating what to do with it. Sometimes one took it, sometimes the other. The one’s face was severe and decisive: his arms went up and down as though he were actually holding an ax and striking. The other’s face was tame, ... his eyes full of compassion.” John urges Jesus to strike, to announce and commence the judgment that John has been warning of. But Jesus won’t do it.

Now this is a fictional conversation – what the relationship between John and Jesus was like in their later years we don’t really know, except for this passage from today’s Gospel lesson. John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” What is going on with John? John was the first to acknowledge Jesus. It was John who sought to be baptized by Jesus. What on earth has happened to John?

Well, John is in prison, first of all. Herod, that wily old fox, that weak-willed Roman puppet, has locked him up after one too many sermons out there by the Jordan. Beyond that, John is getting older. He sees the end laid out in front of him and he’s beginning to wonder, just a bit, whether this was all worth it.

There’s another problem and we’ve had a hint of it already. Back in chapter 9 of Matthew’s Gospel, John’s disciples came to Jesus asking, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?” It isn’t hard to see the implied criticism in this question. We fast, even the Pharisees fast, why don’t you? I mean, are you serious about being the Messiah, or what?

And of course, this criticism is just the beginning. Why are you hanging around with lepers and tax collectors and women? Why are you going out to dinner with all the people I went out to the desert to get away from? Why aren't you screaming at them the way I did? And what are you doing with these Gentiles? Where is the winnowing fork? Where is the fire? Are you the one I've been waiting for? Are you the one I've given my life for? Or has all this just been a mistake?

The subtext is clear – you aren't the Messiah I expected. Jesus, in his reply, admits as much. Tell John what you hear and see, he says. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor hear the good news. This is the Messiah I am, regardless of what you expected.

Now, we look at this list of accomplishments – blind people can see, lame people walk and so on, and we say, wow, that's good stuff. But, you know, that *isn't* what John expected. John expected the end of the world. John expected the Messiah to tear the whole thing down and start over, but Jesus isn't doing that, doesn't expect to do that, doesn't intend to do that. Jesus is making things whole, Jesus is healing, Jesus is fulfilling God's expectations, not John's. This is the Messiah I am, regardless of what you expected. And Jesus adds a special, gentle message – “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” Blessed are you, John, if you can see God's hand in what I am doing.

Jesus could be talking to us, too. I sometimes think we're more like John than we'd like to admit. We're impatient with the world as it is. I don't want to pick up the telephone and hear about another person who needs help with the rent, someone who is tired or sick or hungry. I don't want to hear about another car crash or another death, or someone who is in the hospital or needs to be bailed out of jail. You said you were going to transform the world,

you said you were coming back, you said everything would be different. Well, where are you?

Jesus treats John gently and respectfully. What did you go out to the desert to see, he asks the crowd. A weak reed that blows with the wind, this way and that? Well, that's not John. A weak king in soft robes like Herod? Well, that's not John. John is fierce, John is a prophet, a prophet like Jeremiah or Nathan or Isaiah. John is your drill instructor, your wake-up call, your worst nightmare.

But, Jesus is also saying, John is not part of the kingdom of Heaven, not part of the new existence that I am ushering in, not part of the new reign of God.

I extended the Gospel reading by one verse beyond what is usually the lesson for today, because I think it is the key to this reading and yet, I bet you've never heard this verse before. "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force." What does this mean?

Here's the way I understand it – up until now, believers have sought to establish the Kingdom of Heaven through force, through judgment and anger and calamity and fear, and non-believers have resisted it the same way. But now, God in Christ is trying something different – a reign of God established through patience and healing and love. John is, perhaps, the best of the old way, but his methods have no place in the new way.

John's problem was that his expectations about the Messiah he hoped for blinded him to the Messiah he had. And that can be our problem as well. We lose patience with the world, we want to change it by force. We want to force people to change all across the world, we want laws that will force us, or force others to behave morally, at least the way we define it. We want Christ to

return and clean out the people we don't approve of. We are so focused on the Savior we want that we cannot see the Savior we have. And the weight of our expectations does violence to ourselves and to others, and does an injustice to the real reign of God – a reign of patience and peace, of trust and love.

On a personal level, much of the stress and anxiety of this season comes from expectations, our own or others'. Expectations of the perfect present or the perfect decorations or the perfect party or perfect meal. Everything has to be picture perfect, every expectation met and exceeded, every wish granted, every hope fulfilled. But these expectations can be a heavy weight. They can crush our joy and our wonder. They can blind us to the beauty all around us, beauty we can't see because of our expectations of seeing something else.

In the coming days, try to look around your life a bit less burdened by your expectations. Try to see the beauty and kindness that's already there, the love of friends and family, the joys of simple things and simple activities. Yes, the world's transformation is not yet complete, but it has begun, the patient work of Christ in the world. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at him.

Amen.