

December 14, 2025
The Third Sunday in Advent, Year A
Matthew 11:2-11
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Ready

I understand why he asked. Last week we heard about John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, and he was all the rage. Who would have thought?

John the Baptist, picking locusts out of his teeth, hands sticky with honey, starting a new fashion trend, a camel hair toga, a leather belt around his waist. It's hard to imagine what the great appeal of this wilderness prophet was, but they came in droves, from Jerusalem, from Judea, from all the region around the Jordan river to hear him preach, to hear him warn, and to be baptized by him. Come to think of it, his hands probably weren't sticky at all because of all of the time that he had them in the water, baptizing all who came.

Well, almost all. When the Pharisees and the Sadducees, those who had religious power in his community, teachers and priests, came to the riverside to learn what all the fuss was about, John spoke truth to power, calling them a brood of vipers, children of snakes.

"Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath," he asked. (Matthew 3:7) He downplayed their ancestry, their self confidence and pride in their own position, telling them "I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 3:9b-10)

And where did he get the confidence to say these things? From his absolute belief that God was making a move, that the Messiah was coming, that he knew him and would see him. This was not some long distance, someday, down the road hope, but complete confidence that the one was coming who would baptize with

the Holy Spirit and fire. He believed it, he shaped his whole life around it, he had staked his whole life on it.

When Jesus came to him for baptism, he recognized him, the Messiah for whom he had waited. He didn't even want to baptize Jesus, believing it should be the other way around. He told him, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14)

He believed that Jesus was the one for whom he had waited, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, the one who was more powerful, the one who would come with his winnowing fork in his hand, who would gather the wheat into the granary, into his protection, but who would burn the chaff, those who did not bear good fruit, with unquenchable fire.

We heard about this, confident, sure, passionate John the Baptist in our gospel reading last Sunday. But today we find a very different John, asking a question that feels very understandable, very relatable.

This week we find our fiery prophet from the wilderness in very different circumstances. And it sounds like his fire has gone out. He is no longer in the wide-open spaces, traveling the hills and the river valley. He is no longer commanding crowds, and the truth that he has spoken to power has gotten him locked up. He is in prison, sent there by King Herod, looking out over, not a flowing and life-giving river, but the Dead Sea. And he has questions. When he met Jesus at the Jordan, he seemed to know that he was the one, but now he asks, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matthew 11:3)

And I can understand the question. Because his life has not turned out the way he thought it would, as one who believed so fiercely in the work that God was doing, to judge the world, to turn it to righteousness, to separate the good from the evil, to purify it with refining fire. And the world did not look the way he thought it should, if the Messiah walked the earth. There was still too much evil, still the powerful oppressed the weak, still corrupt rulers flouted God's law. And

John himself was in prison, and he had to know that there was every reason to think that he would not survive long. And he didn't.

So, was it possible, under those circumstances, that Jesus was truly the one for whom he had waited? I understand the question.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Gaudete Sunday. The Sunday of rejoicing. The pink candle Sunday on Advent wreaths that still have three purple candles and one pink candle.

And I am wearing black under these robes. Not blue for Advent. Not pink for joy, but black. Black for remembrance. Black for mourning. Black for the slaughter of the innocents. I know what it's like to have Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of joy, feel like a slap in the face, like a mockery of communal grief.

I remember having to preach to a congregation of people reeling from the slaughter of the innocents at Sandy Hook Elementary School, some of whom had taught there, some who had children whose friends had died there, some of whom had colleagues who had died there, and there was no way I could say to those people in that moment, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4) which was the first line of our epistle reading that Sunday. Instead, I read and preached on these words from the gospel of Matthew,

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:16-18).

Because that's what we were doing. Weeping for the children who were no more.

Today's Gaudete Sunday was going to be hard enough. Not just close to the date, but the actual date of that communal tragedy, to which I was adjacent by virtue of geography and also by virtue of having my own first grader at the time. Who was at school while about five miles away from Sandy Hook Elementary School when what happened there was happening.

Today's Gaudete Sunday was going to be hard enough, and then I heard about what happened at Brown University yesterday. Another slaughter of innocents, because anyone sitting in their classroom working on their exams, does not deserve the death penalty, or a lifetime of medical problems from wounds that they received while studying.

In our Old Testament reading for today we hear the hope of the prophet, "the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and shouting." (Isaiah 35:1-2a) But today, I am wearing black and instead of rejoicing it feels like I am in prison. It feels like we are in prison. Looking out over a landscape of death, and asking with John the Baptist "Is this the one? Is Jesus the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

Because it feels like the world should be different, a world shaped by the presence of the Messiah.

I have been reveling in our confession liturgy this Advent season, specifically in the words of absolution, which are the words I say at the end of the confession to remind and reassure you and all of us that our sins are forgiven. This is what I have been saying:

God judges us not as we deserve,
but according to God's own righteousness.

✝ You are freed and forgiven,
saved by grace,
and ready to welcome the Savior.

I love the idea that we ready to welcome the savior. On one level, when I hear it, I hear it speaking to my own level of preparation, in terms of readiness for Christmas. Tree undecorated, presents unwrapped, some still unpurchased, living room full of boxes of decorations to be unpacked and placed artistically around the house, cards started but nowhere near ready to be sent, pageant unrehearsed.

But on another level, probably a more accurate in terms of its intent level, I think that the words of absolution are not specifically about some kind of holiday preparedness. They are not about externals, but about internal spiritual preparedness.

The words of absolution remind me, remind us, that no matter how much we might feel like we have messed up in life, how much time we might have spent on the wrong path, how much we might feel like we're missing the mark even now in terms of faithfully following Jesus, we are ready, ready to welcome our savior, not because of our own righteousness, our own goodness, but because of God's love, God's righteousness, God's grace poured out on us. We are freed and forgiven and ready.

Ready or not, the words of absolution remind me, here comes Christmas. Here comes Jesus. Good news. We are ready.

But, of course, the date, the news, a black shirt instead of hopeful Advent blue or rejoicing pink, remind me of another kind of readiness, a John the Baptist kind of readiness. A readiness, that is not just preparations, that is not just individual or spiritual, but a readiness for God to break open the world, to put an end to the

evil, the violence, the games that the powerful play with the vulnerable, the slaughter of the innocents committed to preserve power and profit.

The words of absolution are right. I am ready to welcome the savior, who comes to restore the earth, who comes to comfort the wailing mothers and fathers and give them their children back, who comes to cut down the trees bearing evil fruit, who comes to burn the chaff, all that is not life giving and life preserving. I am ready for that, more than ready for that.

And that is coming and in that coming, we can rejoice, even through our tears. And while we wait, we should watch for signs, signs that might feel small, signs that might go unnoticed, while we as a society, as a culture, sit in a prison of our own making and look out on a landscape of death.

Because Jesus is the one. The one for whom we have waited. And there is hope in his presence. There was hope when he walked the earth in John the Baptist's time, and there is hope now as he moves through the world now, through his people, blessed by his Spirit, speaking and enacting comfort and healing and transformation in a world of despair. Jesus said, in response to John the Baptist's question and in response to our questions:

“the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease 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.”

(Matthew 11:4-6)

Jesus is the one. We are ready. Amen.