

The Second Sunday in Advent
St. Matthew 11:2-10: "Look What I've Done for You."
December 10, 2017 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

+ + +

O gracious and merciful Lord Jesus Christ, who by countless signs and wonders showed Yourself to be the true Messiah that was to come, in whom alone we trust and do not look for another, we give You thanks for the true knowledge of You, and humbly ask You, keep us steadfast in Your Word, lest, being offended in You, we be led to depart from You; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 53)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the eleventh chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by Me." / As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.'" (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who has done all things well (Mk. 7:37), dear fellow redeemed:

When there is something that you want, something that is good and, as far as you can tell, God-pleasing, it is a great test and trial not to receive it. The longer you go without it, the more it occupies your thinking. You imagine how free your mind would be to pursue other good things if only that one concern were resolved. This may be the situation of someone who is unemployed or injured, who can think of nothing better than getting back to work. It could be the experience of a single person, who longs to have a spouse and a family. Or it could be the married couple which greatly desires the blessing of a child.

I

This last cross, the cross of barrenness, is what a man named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had to endure. Zechariah was a priest and Elizabeth a homemaker. The evangelist Luke says about them that "they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (Lk. 1:6). They obviously were not perfect, but they were humble and

pious people. In this, they were blessed. But there was one blessing that God had not given them.

It is certain that they prayed fervently for a child. Even as she aged, Elizabeth might have comforted herself with the example of Hannah, who prayed for a son and was given Samuel. Or they might have thought of Abraham and Sarah, who did not have a child together until Abraham was about 100 and Sarah was 90. But each passing month made the possibility more remote. It would be no surprise if Zechariah and Elizabeth felt some bitterness about this. After all, they had faithfully served the LORD throughout their lives. They had entrusted their being and doing to His hands. Not out loud but perhaps in their heads, each of them might have thought, "Look what I've done for You. Won't You grant this one blessing?"

God always answers prayer, but not always in the way we want. His answer to Zechariah and Elizabeth for a long time was, *"My grace is sufficient for you"* (2Cor. 12:9). They accepted that in faith. But then one day, God sent His angel Gabriel to visit Zechariah in the holy place of the temple. Gabriel said, *"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord"* (Lk. 1:13-15). Not only would God give them a son, but this son would be unique. He was the God-ordained messenger for the coming Messiah.

As John grew, the LORD prepared him for his work. Through conversations with his parents and study of the Scriptures, John learned what God was calling him to do. At the LORD's command, *"he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"* (Lk. 3:3). He lived an austere life. He wore clothes made from camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey. Despite these eccentricities, many came to the wilderness to hear him preach and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River.

But as boldly as John preached and as popular as he was, John said that *"he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire"* (Mt. 3:11-12). John did not come up with these ideas on his own. He read the prophecy in the Book of Malachi, that a messenger (John himself) would prepare the way for the Coming One, who *"is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap"* (Mal. 3:2). This Coming One would refine and purify sinners and punish those who did not repent.

Once Jesus was revealed to John as the Coming One, John must have become even bolder in his teaching and preaching. Soon Jesus would take up the charge, and all would follow Him. But things did not play out as John might have planned. King Herod did not like what John was saying and had him arrested and thrown in prison. Meanwhile Jesus increased His public activity, but He did not turn into the fire and brimstone preacher that John may have been expecting. So from prison John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, *"Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?"*

We cannot say for sure whether John was asking for his own benefit, or for the benefit of his disciples, so they would leave John and follow Jesus. But for how committed John was to his

wilderness work, it would not be surprising if his stay in prison was causing him to be anxious and unsettled. What good could he do for God there? Wouldn't the Lord set him free? "Look what I've done for You, Lord. I will gladly do more." But no doubt John would have added, "Not my will, but Yours be done." The Lord's answer to his prayers was a quick release from his suffering. King Herod had John beheaded, and John's soul joined the saints in heaven.

II

Our reward for good deeds in this life does not always come about like we want. Sometimes our good efforts are rewarded with indifference, as though we had done nothing. Sometimes they are rewarded with evil, as our kindnesses are abused or thrown back in our faces. Children might whine about how their parents never give them what they want, or they might complain about eating the food in front of them. And parents may think or even say, "Look what I've done for you, how hard I've worked to provide for you. But you're never happy!" Or an employee might go out of her way to please her boss, but all she hears is criticism. "Look what I've done for you," she thinks. "Why should I even try?"

It's just as easy to feel resentment toward God. When you stand up for what is right or warn someone about their sin, you might be mercilessly attacked by them in return. And you cry out to God, "Look what I've done for you! Why don't you defend me and stop these attacks?" Or you might get injured or sick and pray for healing that is slow in coming if it comes at all. "Are you punishing me, Lord? Where have I failed you?" Or you may see your ungodly neighbor prosper, while you struggle. "Look what I've done for you, Lord. Why do those who ignore You and Your Word fare better than I do?"

The answers in these times of difficulty don't come easily. Waiting for God's answer to our prayers, waiting for God's justice, can seem endless. Is help coming or not? If we are paying attention to today's text, we shouldn't wonder if the Lord cares about our troubles. Jesus said to John's disciples, *"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."* Jesus cares both about people's physical and spiritual needs. He answered the prayers of the blind, lame, leprous, and deaf and healed them. He even brought the dead back to life.

And for the spiritually poor, the suffering, the anxious, the troubled, the weary, the grieving – Jesus imparted good news. What might that good news have been? There is only one Gospel proclaimed by God, and that is the good news of forgiveness and life by His grace alone. Nothing else but this can comfort the poor sinner.

The Gospel is Jesus' own **"Look What I've Done for You."** If you feel burdened by just your own sins, Jesus took upon Himself the burden of all sins – including yours. If you feel that you have suffered unjustly, Jesus suffered the venomous bite of Satan and the holy wrath of God in your place, though He never did anything wrong. Whatever you have had to endure, Jesus endured immeasurably more out of love for you. All of your and my "Look what I've done for You" fade and disappear in the bright light of His perfect life and innocent death.

And that is what needs to happen. There is no comfort or justice to be found by appealing to the righteousness of your own actions. No matter how honest and humble you are, you still are not

perfect. You are still a sinner, who must be justified by God if you would be justified at all. And you are justified. When you are convicted by the Law, Jesus calls your attention to His perfect life and says, "Look what I've done for you." When you worry about your sins, old and new, and wonder if there could be forgiveness for your wicked thoughts and deeds, Jesus draws your eyes to His blood-soaked cross and to the marks of the nails in His hands and feet and says, "Look what I've done for you." When you tremble at your approaching death and worry that you will not have enough faith to get to heaven, Jesus points you toward His empty tomb and says, "Look what I've done for you."

Whatever God commanded you to do, Jesus has done for you. This is why Jesus says, "*blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.*" Whoever is offended by Jesus and denies Him remains under a curse. But whoever believes in Him and confesses His saving name is blessed. You are blessed even when you do not get exactly what you want and expect from Him. God gives you what you need through His Word and Sacraments, so that you can face with confidence the trials ahead and look with hope to the end of your troubles and the eternal glory to come.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

+ + +