
BLUE CHRISTMAS

I don't know how many of you track such things, but there is often a continuity in the lessons from week to week.

- But the movement from last week's reading to this week's is certainly unexpected and perhaps a little confusing.
 - In just seven days we've jumped from the third chapter of Matthew to the eleventh,
 - and months forward in the historic narrative Matthew shares.
 - In just a week, we've gone from the fire-and-brimstone confidence of John in the wilderness,
 - to locked-behind-bars skepticism and despair.
 - From freedom to confinement,
 - from wide-open spaces to pent-up captivity.
- A change of place causes a change of perspective.
- No longer are people coming to John.
 - More likely people are positioning themselves as far away from him as possible.

This displacement is not unfamiliar to us.

- We regularly charge ahead with our dreams and plans, marching forward with optimism and certain about the future,
 - only to be halted and caught up short, whether by cancer, or loss of relationship, or the death of a loved one, or any of a thousand other things that can cause us to move from freedom to captivity.
- When you are imprisoned, your questions change.
- When you are captive, your yearnings change.
- When your freedom to roam has been taken away, you then have an altered sense of freedom, perhaps—
 - the freedom to ask questions you have not risked asking before,
 - questions you have not dared to voice or that you have been told never to utter.
 - “Are You really the ONE who was to come?”
 - “Should we be looking for someone or something else?”
 - These are questions we ourselves may ask from our own prisons that confine us to a limited imagination about GOD.
 - These are questions of longing for what we dearly hope, but then wonder if it can truly be.
 - Longing for what was, but at the same time looking forward to what could be.

Being in a situation where you feel isolated or trapped or locked away can be all the harder at this time of year when the manufactured cheeriness of the season seems to make us feel inadequate or selfish or just wrong because of our struggles.

- Which is why this passage may be just the thing we need on this third Sunday in Advent, the day marked with the “candle of joy” in the Advent wreath.
- A passage like this may be just what we need because it introduces a little reality in our progress toward Bethlehem.
 - Even as we anticipate the birth of the CHRIST child, giving thanks for that gift, and the hope that HIS coming means with its promise of new and eternal life,
 - yet still things can be quite difficult in the meantime.

So, a picture of John the Baptizer sharing his doubts can reassure us and remind us that doubt is not the opposite of faith,

- and that those who believe that the Christian life is one seamless march forward from one success to another, or even from less faith to more, haven't been paying attention.
-

Mature Christian faith knows better because it is patterned on the biblical,

- though it's easy to forget in this time of decorations and carols and social gatherings, JESUS did not come as the victorious conqueror that many then—and perhaps some now---wished HE would.

- Rather, JESUS came and comes as EMMANUEL—GOD *with us*—the ONE who does not eliminate all our troubles,
 - but accompanies us through them,
- the ONE who enters into our suffering and struggle,
 - and reminds us that we are not alone;
- and the ONE who promises to bring us through all things,
 - even and ultimately through death to new life

Even the Christmas story in John's gospel tells us that the LIGHT of the world does not come to vanquish the darkness, but rather to shine on in the midst of it,

- and that the darkness can neither comprehend nor conquer such light.

And so, we stand with Christians of all times and ages in the meantime,

- waiting between the first advent of JESUS in the flesh of a human child and HIS second advent in glory to heal all hurts, right all wrongs, wipe every tear from the eye, and bring peace to the nations.

But waiting can be hard.

- And the collision of the festive, even joyful nature of the season and the experience of personal loss or fear some of folks are feeling can be quite painful.
-

I recall speaking with a faithful, Christian woman who told me of the fear and pain this season brings because of the anger and abuse with which her husband responds at this time of year.

- "As much as I want to celebrate the birth of JESUS," she told me, "I almost wish Christmas never came around."

To address this reality in the lives of many, some congregations have begun hosting a "Blue Christmas" worship a little ahead of December 25,

- a celebration of CHRIST'S incarnation and birth particularly for those dealing with loss, disappointment, grief or depression.
 - It is a time to remind those who feel imprisoned in those emotions of sadness or despair that they are not unfaithful in their grief or doubt,
 - just as someone as bold as John the Baptizer had his own "Blue Christmas."
- Just as importantly, it offers an opportunity to remind those who struggle in this season and all of us, for that matter, that the GOD we know in JESUS not only understands our pain and loss, but accompanies us during these times.

And to those who do struggle with personal feelings of loss, especially in this season, let me say that it is okay to be selfish.

- It is alright not to feel joyful or merry.
 - Take time to grieve or weep,
 - but do so in the knowledge that CHRIST is there beside you as you do.

Waiting is hard, but it is indeed part of the Christian life.

- We do not only wait in this Advent season, however.
 - We also prepare.
- Anticipating CHRIST'S return, we act to get ready for it.
 - And when I say that, I don't mean private preparation about "getting right with the LORD."
 - Rather, I mean that, because we believe CHRIST is coming, we work now for the kind of world we believe GOD desires us to inhabit,
 - knowing that whatever setbacks or disappointments we experience are temporary.

Waiting is hard, but like John, we can bring our questions and our doubts and our hopes.

- And as we wait, we can follow the example of JESUS and work and struggle and care,
 - offering through our words and deeds the healing a peace that comes from the GOD we know in JESUS.
 - Our prayer of "Come, LORD JESUS" and our singing of "O Come, O Come, EMMANUEL," certainly express our hope for HIS return.
 - But they also name our confidence that HE does come, to bless our efforts done in support of those who feel imprisoned,
 - and for a world that waits and wants and hopes for what GOD promises to bring,
 - through GOD'S people now in part,
 - and through CHRIST'S return in its fullness.

John's question to JESUS isn't simply a question.

- It's also a plea for understanding and reassurance.

Similarly, JESUS' answer to look to HIS deeds of mercy isn't only an answer to John's question.

- It is also a call to action—and not just to John, but to all of us.
- It is a call that reminds us of GOD'S promises of healing and peace.
- And it is a call that empowers us to work for those things in the meantime.
 - *"Go back and report what you hear and see:*
 - *"The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.*
 - This is what can be done and what is being done through GOD'S people now by the power of CHRIST,
 - following CHRIST'S example and responding to HIS call to bring sight to those who just don't or can't see,
 - mobility to those who are crippled physical and emotionally,
 - healing to those who are in pain,
 - hearing to those who don't understand,
 - bringing life to those whose lives have become tombs,
 - and announcing the good news of JESUS CHRIST to any and all who are poor in faith,
 - all done in the name of HIM who comes and who will come.
 - It is the true joy we can bring into the Blue Christmas's of the lives of others as we wait and as we watch and as we work—in the meantime.