

“Finding the Peace We Need”  
December 7, 2025, Advent II  
Scripture: Isaiah 43:19-21; Matthew 11:1-11

This story about John’s question to Jesus, and it’s included only in Matthew and Luke, strikes me as very authentic. We don’t really know a lot about John. All we’re told is he sort of came out of nowhere and started preaching about repentance, about people getting their lives in order, because something big was about to happen. It’s tempting to think of him like a street corner preacher who carries a sign that says, “The End Is Near!” I’ve run across those people occasionally, maybe you have, too, and my reaction is usually to duck my head and not make eye contact. But it wasn’t like that for John. They came out in droves to hear him.

So, John was tapping into some deep anxiety people were feeling and offering them an answer, a solution to their fear. He understood that people need some concrete way to calm the turmoil they carry. In Matthew’s gospel, when you read that part of his story, he offers the act of baptism in the Jordan itself. That symbolic gesture is meant to signal a change in their lives and set them on a new path. In Luke’s gospel, he’s portrayed as adding a little to it by telling folks what they now need to do, like giving away their possessions to the poor or for soldiers, not harassing people or using extortion against them. Tax collectors are told not to cheat people anymore. They’re told to behave differently now as evidence of their repentance.

All of that is to prepare them for the new age that was about to dawn, for the Messiah who would change everything. He had it all worked out. He knew what to expect. The way he puts it in Matthew’s telling says it all: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. 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 will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” That sounds pretty rough! There’s a cataclysm coming, he believed, and no one would escape God’s justice.

That’s what John expected. The thought of it gave him, believe it or not, peace. As far as John was concerned, nothing would be better than retribution for those who opposed God’s will. That meant, I’m sure, the religious officials, the Pharisees and Sadducees he excoriates for coming to be baptized, and it also included the Roman occupiers whom the Messiah would surely drive out of the land. John was pretty intense; it’s hard to imagine him ever being at peace. But I think the thought of some great reckoning probably helped.

Which may be why he sent his cohorts to Jesus. He’s not hearing about any retribution; no fire from the heavens; no recompense for God’s enemies. Jesus has no interest in any of that. Where John expects an unquenchable fire, Jesus brings healing. Putting the world right isn’t done through violence; it’s done through compassion. And it’s not some massive cataclysmic event that no one could miss. It’s a quiet revolution accomplished one person at a time. Jesus doesn’t come to overthrow governments and visit vengeance on his enemies. He comes to meet us one by one—opening our eyes, unstopping our ears, bringing us back to life. That’s what he tells John’s messengers to say.

While Jesus admires John and recognizes the importance of his message, he isn't willing to follow John's plan and force God's kingdom on the world. We don't know how John felt about that. The next time we hear about him it's the report of his execution by Herod. John goes to his death possibly still wondering if Jesus really is the One. Throughout the gospels there's always an element of uncertainty. The people who follow Jesus are constantly asking if they've done the right thing by leaving behind their livelihoods and families. Even Jesus is portrayed in Gethsemane agonizing over what he's about to face in his arrest and crucifixion. So, we shouldn't be ashamed if we find it hard to feel confident about the future. Our anxiety, our fears are shared by all God's people in every time and place.

We can hear it in Isaiah's words. The brief reading we heard from the prophet comes during a period of deep uncertainty in Israel's life. They've returned from exile to find their homeland in ruins. Jerusalem has been reduced to rubble. As they pick their way through it many begin to wonder if it's all worth it. They start to question why they should even bother. Yet they know that if they can't rebuild they'll become nationless, they'll be at the mercy of every other society and never be their own people. It's in the midst of that fear that God offers these words of promise. This chapter begins with God's announcement: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." They're not forgotten, no matter how frightened they may feel. And they're not abandoned; they're not left to fend for themselves: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not know perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

When we find ourselves lost in a wilderness of fear and anxiety, God promises to open a way out. God will not leave us to our own devices. Which is a good thing, because when we're left on our own, we do some pretty horrible things. I think John's failure to understand Jesus' ministry was really a failure of imagination. He couldn't conceive of God's kingdom breaking in without some kind of violent assault. When we're so filled with indignation and offense over the injustices we see in the world, it's tempting to want it all resolved through violence. We think, somehow, the peace we need can be found through retribution and vengeance.

But the way through the wilderness God promises does not lead through violence. Finding the peace we need comes through compassion and healing. This is Jesus' message to John. As he's languishing in prison wondering if he's promoted the right guy because Herod is still on the throne and Rome is still in charge, Jesus points him to the acts of healing being performed, sight and hearing being restored, life given to the dead. In other words, Jesus is awakening those he encounters to a new reality. They are no longer victims of oppression, cowering in fear, but are residents of God's kingdom and able to meet injustice with hope and live in ways that reveal God's presence even when events around them deny it.

I've always felt a little ambivalent about Advent. It puts so much emphasis on "waiting." It feels too passive, as if we're meant to just sit around doing nothing until God's kingdom finally drops on us. But that's not what Jesus' ministry was about. God's kingdom doesn't break in with a show of force no one could miss. It unfolds slowly, gradually through the actions of those committed to revealing it. To do that we need to cultivate within ourselves a sense of

peace; we have to find ways to develop confidence in God's presence in spite of realities around us that cause fear and anxiety.

A good place to start is to seek out those places where restoration is occurring. We heard last week about Harvest House. In the midst of some of the deepest poverty in our community, we're invited to participate in a ministry of restoration and healing, meeting fear with compassion. Today we'll hear about another effort, Providence Farm Collective, that seeks to bring healing to under-resourced communities in need of access to fresh food and farmland. There are ways to counter the effects of systems of oppression and dominance that create a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. But only if we're willing to walk the path of compassion and healing that Jesus walks. We are the instruments of God's action in the world. We find the peace we need through reaching out with love to bring sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and the dead back to life.

We do not have to live in fear or be paralyzed by anxiety, even in a world where it seems as if the forces of hate and violence have the upper hand. God's kingdom is here so long as we are willing to reveal it through acts of generosity and compassion. As we make our way through this season of Advent, may Jesus' ministry of restoration and healing empower us to action that brings hope and guides us into the way of peace.

Amen