

Prayer of the Day:

Hear our prayers, Lord Jesus Christ, and come with the good news of deliverance. Drive the darkness from our hearts and fill us with your light; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit one God now and forever. Amen.

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. Alleluia (Matthew 11:10 cf. NIV)

Sermon Text:

Don't judge a book by its cover. Appearances are often misleading. Looks can be deceiving. What really matters is invisible to the eyes. Beauty is only skin deep. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes. One sees clearly only with the heart. Looks aren't everything. All that glitters is not gold. Things aren't always as they seem.

That's what my cursory search for that final phrase turned up, a litany of sayings which, while shading meanings in various directions, all ultimately point to the same truth. Things aren't always what they seem.

Perhaps we would think that with so many little phrases for this our society, and you and I along with it, would have it covered. But then perhaps it is exactly the opposite. Perhaps we have so many ways of saying this precisely because we constantly need the reminder in our lives. Doubt and despair can be constant friends. And so we come to the Third Sunday of Advent and the reminder is announced once more, Yes, **THINGS AREN'T ALWAYS WHAT THEY SEEM.**

We fast forward a bit from last week on the banks of the Jordan river. Then it was large crowds, the dress and diet of the Old Testament's greatest prophets, and bold words as John the baptizer preached repentance and preparation for the coming kingdom. This week our wild man is caged like a wild animal and he sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "*Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?*"

Commentaries and theologians have gone back and forth on this one over the years. Is John doubting here or is he giving a question to the disciples for their benefit more than his own? I really don't see why it can't be a bit of both. Remember who John is. Oh, sure he is certainly that

Text: Matthew 11:2-11

² When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

⁴ Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

¹¹ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. – NIV84

impressive preacher of repentance who stands in the gap between the Old Testament and New. He is the voice in the desert that once cried out, “*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.* (John 1:29)” But he’s also the forerunner and not the Christ, which means He’s a sinner just like you and me. Perhaps the one who told the Pharisees and Sadducees that *the ax is already at the root of the trees* (Matthew 3:10) is beginning to wonder if it is ever going to swing. Perhaps the cold cell has John yearning for the unquenchable fire which would burn up the chaff of unbelief. While he knows the truth, doubt begins to take its toll, not unlike Elijah complaining to God while on the run after the victory of Mount Carmel or Jonah pouting that the enemies are being saved rather than slaughtered.

I’ve been there more often than I care to admit, maybe you have been too. Ashamedly, it takes far less to get me there though. No prison cell, but like Peter often just the pointed questions of the world around me. I don’t think things look very successful as the church barely hits its budget again in December or when the world isn’t falling over itself to listen to our sermons. Truth be told, it’s just getting harder and harder to have all the members show up of a weekend. Sin rears it’s head and I lose mine. Maybe it’s because I thought I was Jesus or at least I was supposed to do His job (better than Him too) rather than being His church, His hands, His feet to be used as He saw fit.

It shouldn’t be surprising I suppose. That’s always what happens when I focus on the sinful world around me or put too much stock in my own sin-stained works. I begin to think everything should be turning up roses rather than wallowing in wretchedness, forgetting completely that Jesus once warned, “*If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.* (John 15:18)” But then He also promised, “*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* (Mathew 5:11–12” Yes, unfortunately this side of heaven, **OUR WORLD AND WORKS MAY OFTEN LEAVE US WONDERING.**

Of course, put yourselves in John’s shoes again as he looks to the disciples who see him now imprisoned and looking unimpressive, wondering if they have been listening to the wrong guy all along. Maybe John sends them to Jesus with this question that they too might hear Jesus’ answer. “*Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.*”

John is the forerunner after all. The finger of God which was to point the way for the promised Messiah, the Son of God Himself, who would defeat sin, death, and devil. So, doubting or not, struggling in prison or not, I can easily see him turning to the only One with answers in hardship and trial or in joy and happiness.

What is Jesus response? It is not well guys look at everything you have done or even rest on your own power and intellect to figure it out. Instead, Jesus points at the proof of it all. He points to Himself. He is the fulfillment of scripture. A prophecy is fulfilled! Isaiah had spoken beautiful words of promise as he foretold of the coming of God. ⁴ *say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.” ⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.* Jesus answer is perfect isn’t it? The vengeance and the retribution will come but right now is the salvation, the

healing, the proof that Jesus is the Son of God who has come to this world to do exactly as John announced. So, ⁶ *Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.*

And of course, there is the answer for the doubts that assail us and troubles us. Having pointed back to Himself and the proof that He was the God-man, the Messiah who would save the world from sin, Jesus speaks of where strength of faith truly come from. ⁷ *As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."*

Our confidence is not found in the wishy-washy whims of the world around us which flip back and forth with popular opinion. Nor is it found in the finer things of life, or even in those that have them. Rather our confidence is found in the message which God sends. In the voice of the messengers who He supplies. As pastors, teachers, family, and friends point us to the One who is greatest in the kingdom of Heaven because He was willing to endure the worst this sinful world, Satan and death could throw at Him, to face the punishment and the hell we deserved on the cross. He endured it all and won that the victory might be ours. He sends His Holy Spirit that in Water, Word, and Supper, we might be confident and secure in the promises which God has given. Yes, **JESUS ALONE DEFEATS THE DARKNESS OF DOUBT FOR US.**

Lots of words would remind us that the realities of the world around us aren't always what they seem. Sometimes it seems like evil is winning. Sometimes it seems like we don't matter. Sometimes it seems like there are a million reasons to doubt the promises of our loving God as the world ignores Him or worse. And so today the reminder, **THINGS AREN'T ALWAYS WHAT THEY SEEM. OUR WORLD AND WORKS MAY OFTEN LEAVE US WONDERING. JESUS ALONE DEFEATS THE DARKNESS OF DOUBT FOR US. Amen!**