

Preached at Emmanuel Church, Dec. 11, 2022

When we drop in on John the Baptist and Jesus this morning, John is sitting in prison, put there by Herod, and John is about to die. Jesus is just starting his ministry, with a few years to go before he follows John to the grave. In some ways their stories are similar-both were born in miraculous circumstances announced by Gabriel, both were executed by the government. One difference is that John came from a long line of priests- he had religious cred- and Jesus came from...nobodies. And John didn't spend years preparing for ministry, working in a carpenter's shop. John just came right out of the gate wild eyed and bellowing that the Kingdom is on the way. John ate whatever was at hand, and if there was no food handy, he did not eat. Jesus hung out with people at parties- laughing a lot, eating, and drinking. John was not into distractions but had a laser-like focus on God's kingdom as he envisioned it. Clearly a prophet like those of old.

However, for the previous 500 years prophets had been missing from Israel, which had been occupied, possessed by one conqueror after another-the chosen people of God now valued only for their ability to pay taxes to the current occupying power. And God? Well, God had remained silent throughout all of this humiliation, this nightmare. No Elijah calling fire

down from heaven and displaying God's awesome power for all to see. No Amos castigating the people for their empty religion and obscene wealth. Nothing but crickets.

And then John showed up; a bull horn in the wilderness, speaking God's language-of sin instead of profit, of repentance instead of compromise. It was about time! John was not into new age-y feel good things like helping people realize their full potential, he was all about getting people ready for the kingdom of God. And if that meant pronouncing judgment on anyone and anything that stood in the way of that kingdom, so be it. John even turned his wrath on King Herod, blasting him for being an evil man and seducing his brother's wife. He blasted the Saducees and Pharisees for their self-satisfaction, for focusing on religiousness instead of righteousness. He promised the whole lot that God was coming, not with gentleness, but with an ax, ready to chop down and burn up a world full of dead wood.

And John's stark message got the attention of a whole lot of people-people who began streaming into the desert to see this holy man and hear his crystal clear, no shades of gray message. Hear him tell them that God's reign was coming soon, that God had not abandoned them and the world would very soon be a very different place. John said, "I am the beginning of

that transformation-the one sent to get your attention. But God has someone else in mind to complete it"-someone who was even then walking towards them.

I imagine that when John and Jesus met out in the desert, the air was alive with electricity. Finally, finally, the prophets were done and the Messiah was here. Finally, God's justice was about to be fully established on earth. At least, that was the hope. But then Herod's soldiers showed up and marched John off to prison. And there he sat. I imagine he consoled himself with the knowledge that Jesus was still out inaugurating the Kingdom. And despite the fact that he was in prison, John kept up with what Jesus was saying and doing. Initially, John was likely thrilled. Jesus was getting attention through healing some people, and pulling off a few other miracles. This would help give him the authority he needed when he finally started announcing God's judgment on the people. But time went on, and, by all reports, Jesus was not shifting gears. No stories of fire and brimstone raining down on the sinful and Godless people. Just more healings-and many of them with entirely inappropriate and marginal people: a Roman centurion's slave, a hemorrhaging woman, a Gentile's daughter, lepers, demoniacs. What was going on? How was any of this connected to God's justice, or to helping people know right from wrong? While we can never

know exactly what John was thinking when he sat in that jail, we do know he sent his disciples to ask Jesus a few questions. To figure out why Jesus seemed to be so spiritually...flabby. Clearly not having heard what he wanted and needed to, John sent his disciples with a final plaintive question; "are you the One who is to come or should we wait for another?" In other words, was I wrong about you? Are you really God's Messiah? Because, if you are, then I was wrong about the whole thing. Who are you? And Jesus? Well his response was, as is often the case, maddeningly unclear. Instead of answering, he pointed John's disciples away from him and towards the motley crew around him-those who followed him- those who were gimpy, twitchy, and more whole and alive than they had ever been before. They knew they were the lucky ones, too. There were plenty of blind people who were still blind, and plenty of dead people who were still dead. Jesus could not get around to everyone, but he had gotten around to them and there was not one doubt in their minds who he really was. And, looking at *that* crowd, then at John's disciples, Jesus said, "Go back to John and tell him what you see. The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. The poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Jesus was announcing that Isaiah's long ago pronouncement had, in fact, come true. Not the parts that John was excited about-the vengeance and terrible recompense, but the other part. The part about the lame leaping like deer and the tongues of the speechless singing for joy. And Jesus added his own ending to Isaiah's words, saying to John, "blessed are you, John, if you can handle your disappointment in me."

John, like many of us, had wanted a MESSIAH. A tsunami that washed over the world sweeping away all that we think is evil, making clear to the whole world God's omnipotence, God's justice, God's righteousness.

Instead, Jesus showed up. Someone whose Messiah potential seemed minimal and whose presence was more like a steady drip of mercy than a tsunami of judgment. Given this unexpected Messiah, it is entirely possible John died disappointed- wondering what sort of game God was up to in this humble, languid Savior.

It would be great if I could stand here and say that Jesus' own death did in fact change everything-that once word got out that he was God's Unique One, raised from the dead, everyone saw the light, repented on the spot. Reprioritized their lives to be in line with God's priorities. Lived the way Jesus lived and were rewarded by God. I even wish I could tell you that the whole world now knows who Jesus is-believes that Jesus opened the door

between heaven and earth and believes that, through Christ, God is at work in the world right now and will continue to do so until every creature is reconciled to God. But, I can't. It is hard. Hard sometimes to follow the Messiah who is more drip of mercy than fireball from heaven. It would be easier to have a God who blasted us with a display of power and swept away everyone's doubts once and for all. Instead we get a drip of mercy here and there from those who follow Jesus, the one still playing doctor to a lot of marginal people in this world. In the midst of the relentlessly bleak news there are glimmers of it. The bus driver in Milwaukee who helped a passenger without a home get food and shelter. The person who opened a pizza shop in Philly where you can prepay for a meal for someone else-someone who cannot afford to eat. The people here who pack bags of food for the hungry. Drip. Drip.

These are not big stories. They are small stories, in which only a few people at a time are saved. Meanwhile, there are many others who go on wondering if they have been abandoned by God. They listen to the bold claims of faith. They look at the modest yields. Who can blame when they ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

The only way I know how to answer them is to point out how stone is shaped by water. To look at a round hole in a rock made by...water. Drop by

transparent, short-lived drop, water transforms rock as no tidal wave could ever do. For reasons beyond our understanding, that is how the Messiah has decided to come for now—not all at once but steadily, drop by drop, for millennia. Every time someone lives as he lived by loving as he loved, another drop falls. For some people, it is not enough. For others, it is the way of life. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at him. Amen.