

December 11, 2022

Third Sunday in Advent

Text: Matthew 11:2-11; Isaiah 40:1-11

How many times have you set out looking for something, you know what you're after, but so many distractions happen along the way that what you eventually end up with is something totally different?

Maybe you've gone car shopping like this, say, looking for a nice, practical minivan, but then you notice the nicer interiors available in other models, and heated seats would be nice in the winter, and speaking of winter, four-wheel drive and more ground clearance would be helpful, and pretty soon you're on the other end of the dealership lot looking at the large SUVs. A fully-loaded Suburban is quite a bit different from the Grand Caravan you started off looking at, and is probably not designed toward the goals you originally had in mind before the distractions and emotions came along.

This process of distraction isn't only a trouble in shopping, but can also come in to our view of Christ and His saving Word. When the Holy Spirit first lights that flame of faith in our hearts, or when He grants times of excitement or strengthening, we can be quite sure of what's important. We strive to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

But then life goes on, and temptations arise, and trials hit, and pretty soon our idea of what's truly important is buried or warped by these factors. In this morning's Gospel, Christ addresses these problems and reminds us of what is lasting and meaningful, what we should actually be looking for.

There are two groups of people looking for something and struggling with distraction in our text: John the Baptist and his disciples, and the crowds. Both were originally seeking the right thing, but then other concerns arose and corrupted the original desire.

Let's look at the crowds first. These people are following Jesus as He goes about teaching and preaching, and it seems that before Jesus, lots of them were hearers of John the Baptist. It's concerning John that Jesus addresses the crowds. He asks them, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?"

He's directing them to think back to what they were looking for when they went out to John. To help them return to that original purpose, Jesus points out their distractions.

First, He asks if they went out to see "a reed shaken by the wind." Did they go clear out into the wilderness to hear someone proclaim whatever the current thing was, someone clearly following the winds of culture and politics?

No, they didn't do that! If they wanted someone speaking in step with the times, to validate their already-held ideas, there were plenty of those sort of people in Jerusalem or the other cities.

No, if you're going to hike out into the desert and endure several days there, you want someone with a message worth hearing. You want someone with a spine, someone who actually believes what he's saying. You're there to hear someone speak the straight, unbending truth.

That was true then, and it's true now as well. Sometimes we're tempted to think that if we'd just be a little more flexible on our application of God's Word, if we'd not be so stiff and dogmatic

when it comes to what we believe and teach, then we'd be a lot more popular. No one likes a stick in the mud, right?

Well, there certainly are plenty of church bodies that have taken this approach, watering down their beliefs and compromising on their teaching in an effort to be more appealing. Though this might get some extra numbers short term, it's absolutely toxic in the long run.

Why would this be the case? Well, what – or more correctly who – grows the Church? The Holy Spirit! He is the One who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and who keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

Now, does the Holy Spirit work through the truth of God's Word, or does He work through cultural fads and human ideas opposed to the Word? He works through the truth, for He is the Spirit of Truth. Weakening God's Word, being blown about by the winds and spirits of the age like a limp reed, ultimately leads to those winds flattening the reeds, killing them.

So, as Jesus reminds them, the crowds are not to look for someone blown every which way. He then raises another rhetorical question: "What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?" Here Jesus addresses another distraction getting in the way of what the crowds are to look for.

A man in soft clothing would be a man of wealth, of earthly success, of prosperity. His message would have to be well-received by the well-to-do of society, the upper crust. His clothing shows that He has the approval of the in-crowd, and also those in power, those dwelling in king's houses.

The temptation here is twofold: both to take the material prosperity as a sign of blessing or correctness, and also to try to fit in with those in power. If you listen to the popular preacher and are one of his disciples, then you must be popular, too.

This desire to judge by outward appearances is nothing new to humanity. If a leader, a pastor, a politician, whoever, has a large following, then we assume that he must be doing something right. So many people can't be wrong, can they?

And if he's in the king's house, has favor with those in power, then maybe some of that governmental favor will trickle down to you. Or at the very least, you won't have to worry about being on the wrong side of the law, something which those Christians who believe in God's definition of marriage now find themselves.

As creatures who are prone to peer-pressure and wanting to fit in, it's a great temptation to look for the crowd and their well-heeled leader and follow along. It's a lot easier to do that than to actually listen and think critically about whether or not they're all following the truth.

These distractions, looking for laxity in teaching like a swaying reed or seeking what's popular like a softly-dressed preacher, are what Jesus calls the crowd away from. But what about if you've stood firm and not swayed? What if you've rejected the path of ease and comfort?

This is John the Baptist. He didn't allow himself to be blown about by the winds coming from Jerusalem, but spoke God's Word boldly to everyone from prostitutes and tax collectors to Pharisees

and scribes. John denied worldly comforts and popularity, living in the wilderness eating bugs and wearing itchy camel hair clothing.

And as a result of his faithful preaching of God's Word, particularly that the Sixth Commandment applies to everyone, John finds himself not in a king's house, but in a king's dungeon.

There, in chains, John is faced with another temptation, another thing trying to distract him from what he's looking for. This is the distraction of suffering.

John has been proclaiming the coming of the Christ, pointing people to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He has been carrying out the role chosen for him by God long before he was born.

John's been doing what he's supposed to do, and yet he's behind bars. Wasn't the Messiah supposed to end the warfare, to come with might and gather the flock? Isaiah speaks of comfort, yet is there comfort on death row for John? Attacked by these thoughts, John sends two disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Suffering can lead us to doubt in what we are looking for as well. When things go bad, our first instinct is often to ask what did we do wrong. "If I'm doing what God wants me to do, why am I facing these trials?" "Is this really what I'm supposed to do as a Christian?"

Suffering is also something that our human nature wants to avoid if at all possible. The worse the suffering gets, the more urgently we look for a way out. Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh will do all they can to feed those doubts until we ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come? When will this comfort you speak of finally arrive? What are we to look for?"

These cries do not fall on deaf ears. Our God is the loving God, and He hears when His people call out to Him. Christ addresses the cries of the crowd, the cries of John, the cries of His Church today, always lifting up our heads and directing our eyes to the place of hope, hope grounded in Himself.

He causes us to again look to where we need to look, and in so doing, He gives comfort and peace.

To the crowds, distracted by weak reeds and soft clothing, Jesus directs them back to God's Word. After the first two rhetorical questions, Jesus asks them, "What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet."

A prophet is one who speaks God's Word. What the people needed to go out into the wilderness for was to see a prophet, to hear God's Word.

They didn't need a reed blown about by the wind, someone who would bend over to excuse their sins and make them feel good. They needed a prophet, one who would call them to repentance, one who would call a viper a viper, one who would point out that God's winnowing fork was already at the foot of the tree, ready to cut down those not bearing fruit.

They didn't need someone in soft clothes telling them that, if they just loved God a little more, God would bless them with soft clothes, too. They needed a prophet, one proclaiming that God had

sent His perfect Lamb to be the sacrifice for all their sin, that Jerusalem's days of warfare would soon be ended when the promised Seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent underneath His cross.

The crowds needed a prophet. They needed God's Word.

That Word is still what is needed, what we must look for. That Word calls us to repentance, bringing us to confess our sins that separate us from the God who loves us. That Word points us to the Lamb of God who shed His blood for us, who has defeated our old evil foe and won for us salvation.

That Word both guides us in living a life pleasing to God here and now, and it also reassures us of the life to come when we will dwell in God's presence forever. Casting aside the distractions and temptations, we look to our God who reveals Himself to us and to the nations through His Word.

What of those suffering, especially for the sake of that Word? What of faithful John, held captive in Herod's prison? To him Jesus says, "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 reminds His prophet that the Word he proclaimed was no empty word, but that those works which the Word foretold of the Messiah were indeed happening. God's Word was accompanied by God's action.

John may be a prisoner of evil at that moment, but even as he sits in prison the forces of evil were being driven back as sin and its effects were cleansed, the grave yielded its captives, and those lost in spiritual poverty were blessed with the riches of the Gospel.

God's action still accompanies God's Word today, giving us comfort and reassurance even as we are held in this sinful world. This is the blessing of the Sacraments – God's visible works in the world for us. They let us witness firsthand the breaking in of God's Kingdom into this world.

When Satan assails you, remind him and yourself that you are baptized. That water was no mere symbol or empty ritual, but was God's act of washing you and placing His royal seal and name upon you. The devil and all the forces of hell can rage and scream, but they have no power over one sealed by the Lord Almighty, whose Spirit dwells in his heart.

That same Lord continually comes to us in Holy Communion, giving us a feast of His real body and actual blood. It's a miracle – a literal miracle – where God comes to us physically. When your suffering and trials make you wonder if God is still there for you, then come to the altar and have Him actually give Himself to you under bread and wine.

As His beloved Christians, you can literally "taste and see that the Lord is good," as the Psalmist writes. You can actually be given a foretaste of the victory feast of the Lamb in His Kingdom, as He rends the veil and breaks in to our sinful world again and again.

These blessings, the Word and the Sacraments, are used by God to keep our eyes fixed on what truly matters: the Kingdom of Heaven. That is what we are looking for. That is what we are hoping for.

As Christ says, heaven and earth will pass away, but His words will never pass away. All the false teachings of the swaying reeds will be done away with. All the soft clothes and worldly comforts will be brought to nothing. And all who fight against the Lord and persecute His people will be cast into the darkness forever. All this will pass away, but the Kingdom of Heaven will remain forever.

The citizens of that Kingdom will endure into eternity. Even the least in that Kingdom will be blessed beyond understanding, for they have not only lives born of women, which will end some day, but also lives that are born of water and the Spirit. Their lives – your lives as baptized Christians – are joined to the life of God Himself, and that life will never end.

In the name of Jesus, amen.