

Dreghorn and Springside Parish Church

Third Sunday of Advent 2020

Bible Reading: Matthew 11:2-11 (NIV)

²When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'

⁴Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

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

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

¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Sermon: Active waiting

I love a cold, crisp, clear morning, but winter is a hard time for me as nature seems to go into a kind of lockdown. A time of prolonged waiting, when the leaves have fallen, the vibrancy of green and new life is stripped away, and everything is so muted. Beautiful, but ghostly, sometimes violent but it is so dormant. I try and contend myself by remembering that it's all still there, the fallen leaves and dying off vegetation are feeding and restoring the earth, the seeds are getting ready in the ground, the buds are waiting in the branches, the hedgehog is in hibernation preparing for the Spring – which might be a while off yet, but it is going to come again.

I wonder if you feel the same as me about winter? Waiting for it to pass so we can experience the warmth and new life of Spring again. Waiting can take many other forms. We might be waiting for news; the birth of a child or grandchild, we might be waiting for the job offer, we might be waiting for this vaccine to arrive, we might be waiting to get back to church and some semblance of life as we knew it to return... Beyond waiting for Spring, or news from the maternity ward, jobs, or vaccines, or a physical return to Sunday worship - some of us have waited on God. Maybe we wanted him to act, to answer a prayer, or to fulfil a dream. Perhaps you have experienced disappointment with God, if those things haven't come about, or haven't lived up to your expectations. It is important that, rather than ignoring our struggles, we bring them to God. God can handle us being honest with him about how we feel.

John the Baptist is often someone we think about at Advent, because he proclaimed the coming of Jesus. But John was disappointed because he didn't see God coming up with the goods as John had expected. John would have had his hopes set by the promises Isaiah gave about the coming Messiah that we read of in Isaiah 35:3-6:

“Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; 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.’ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

So, put yourself in John the Baptist’s shoes for a moment. You’ve proclaimed the coming Kingdom of judgement and fire. You’ve criticised the “powers that be” and called them to repentance and radical life-change. You’ve seen Jesus baptised, sent out by the Spirit, and your hopes are well and truly set on him being the fulfilment of hundreds of years of waiting for God’s Messiah to come and put all things right. But then, suddenly, you’re thrown in jail. And Jesus, although quite brilliant, isn’t doing all the things you expected of him. Last you looked; the Romans are still in power. Corrupt priests and teachers are still in charge of the temple. The vengeance and divine retribution promised by Isaiah is nowhere to be seen. Where is all that judgement and fire?

Matthew’s gospel reports this: “When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’” (Matthew 11:2-3)

John seems confused, even disappointed. This wasn’t quite the glorious future he had imagined. Perhaps we can empathise with him in the areas where we’ve felt disappointed or discouraged. When we do, we should follow John’s example of being honest with God about our disappointments - asking questions, lamenting difficult experiences, handing them over to Jesus. We see in this passage, from Jesus response to John, that Jesus is big enough to deal with our sadness and our confusion.

To understand what is going on with John, we need to understand his expectations. John expected a king to come, and in a great and glorious victory wipe away the oppressors and then restore Israel to glory. But Jesus is a different kind of King, his Kingdom is not about power and might, but love, servanthood, and self-sacrifice. His victory doesn’t come with swords and chariots, instead victory comes by lifting up the poor and the sick and the vulnerable. He doesn’t force or coerce people to follow him, instead he reveals the heart of God to them and invites them to freely choose him as their Lord... So, Jesus responds to John: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” (Matthew 11:4-5).

These are all fulfilments of Isaiah’s prophesy. They are beautiful, remarkable acts of kindness and justice. They are not, however, the swift and decisive judgement and victory over enemies and restoration that Israel hoped for. This is not the goal that John had pictured, and he begins to doubt if Jesus is the promised Messiah after all. John has his mind so fixed on his idea of the destination that he is missing the journey. He imagined a future of judgement and justice which has not yet arrived, and he is allowing this to distract him from the signs of the Kingdom of God that Jesus is already revealing.

Just like John, we need to allow God to meet us in our waiting, to see how he is bringing his Kingdom around us, even though we have not yet reached our final destination.

John was disappointed because he was unable to see the bigger story of what God was up to with his first and second Advent. The first Advent starts with the birth of Jesus, God’s Son, the Messiah. His birth kicks-off the beginning of the new Kingdom of God on earth, bringing healing and truth and love. He dies to restore creation to God and rises again, victorious over death and King of the world.

His resurrection body is the first shoots of new life coming out of barren winter soil – he is the promise and the template of new life for all who follow him.

And the second Advent, when Jesus will return to complete the work that he has begun... We have come to expect this to be a time of God's final judgement. When God burns away all that is unjust, impure, ungodly. When God lays bare the earth as in winter, until the old "order" has passed away and the new order comes, the growth of love and peace, joy and life, righteousness and justice.

So, we find ourselves stuck between the first and the second Advent, what do we do? What do we do in this time of waiting? Do we hunker down with the hedgehogs and hibernate? Not a chance, Jesus makes it truly clear what we are to do in the time of waiting. In the Gospel of John at Chapter 20:21 he says, "As the father has sent me, so I am sending you".

"As the father has sent me, so I am sending you", that's what we have been given to do. To live our lives as Jesus lived. This living of life is not dependant on a building re-opening, it is a way of being - bringing healing to those we meet on the journey, opening hearts and spiritual eyes to God – by being his people, casting out fear and loneliness, healing hurts, gathering our neighbours back to the Father's embrace.

We are to so busy that we don't have time to clock-watch Jesus return, we the church of Dreghorn and Springside Parish have a real job to get on with – actively waiting: preparing the ground, sowing the seeds, making all things ready for the Springtime of Jesus return.

And just after Jesus says, 'As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'.

This actively waiting that we have to be getting on with then, is not something we do all on our own, we do it together and we do it because we are sent by God the Father, we are disciplined by Jesus the Son and we are enabled by the Holy Spirit. So, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, go, because God calls, God equips and God goes with you. Amen.

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