

“Yearning for the Shimmering Road”

The Third Sunday of Advent
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A poem called “John the Baptist” by Trina Zelle:

*This strange child of their old age
didn't laugh much
Small hands dry as the sandy soil
in which he played
With single-minded urgency
he would hug his old mother
and stare down the shimmering road
over her shoulder.*

We have no idea what John the Baptist was really like as a child, but this poet may very well have given us an accurate picture out of her own imagination—John the Baptist, a serious child of aged parents, yearning for something—or someone—down that road of the future. I love the poet's image of the shimmering road, as on an August day, when sun and heat really do make the road look like it's shimmering.

What we do know about John is this: **Luke's** gospel tells us that John the Baptist was born by the power of God to parents well beyond the age of child-bearing, Elizabeth and Zechariah. Angel messengers informed them their child was destined to be a prophet. And today's scripture from **Matthew's** gospel tells us of a grown-up John the Baptist. By this point in the gospel, John has already fulfilled that destiny, having prophesied in the wilderness about the coming Messiah. He has already exhorted the people journeying out to him to repent now, and take on good works and lives of faithfulness. He even has already met his cousin, Jesus, and baptized him in the Jordan River, convinced that Jesus is the One he's been telling everybody about, the One he's been trying to prepare people for, the One for whom he's been yearning, staring down that shimmering road.

But this morning we also read that the grown-up John is in prison. And as happens in today's prisons, there were ways of communicating news on the inside even from the outside. John in his prison has heard what Jesus has been doing. There have been miracles, certainly, and wise teachings from Jesus, but there have been other things, too—disconcerting things, like Jesus' propensity for hanging around at mealtime with outcasts, for touching lepers, for talking about turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies, for granting a generous forgiveness. When would Jesus do the stuff John the Baptist had promised his listeners the Messiah was going to do? When would Jesus gather an army, overthrow the Roman Empire and all corrupt powers,

and bring divine fire-laden judgment against the faithless and sinful? And when would the longed-for Messiah usher in such a glorious and powerful rule that even the injustice of John's own imprisonment would be upended, reversed, springing him from jail? When would those things start happening?

To John the Baptist, his cousin Jesus is like the Christmas present you get that isn't exactly what you want. Very nice, but not what you want. I'm telling you now, don't ever buy my husband socks. A few years back when family members asked what they could get Randy for Christmas, he and I suggested socks. I told them Randy really likes a particular brand: Gold Toe Fluffies. Those of you who wear Gold Toe Fluffies know what I mean. That Christmas Randy received several pairs of socks. Some were **not** Gold Toe. Some **were** Gold Toe. **None** of them, however, were specifically **Gold Toe Fluffies**. It wasn't that the socks received were cheap or poorly made. But they weren't exactly what Randy wanted. He likes Gold Toe Fluffies. He likes the way they feel on his feet. He likes the way they look. He likes the way they wear. From now on, I'm the only one who buys Randy socks for Christmas.

John the Baptist prophesied a particular kind of Messiah, a specific kind of servant of God. His cousin Jesus wasn't exactly what he pictured or necessarily wanted.

So, from behind prison walls, John the Baptist sends a message to Jesus: "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" Can you imagine what he might be thinking? Are you the one I looked for as a child, staring down that shimmering road over my mother's shoulders? Are you the one I've been waiting for for years? Just let me know if you're the one. Just let me know if . . . if all this has been **worth** it.

I mean, isn't that where John the Baptist is going with his question? All that I've gone through as your prophet crying out in the wilderness, all that I've spoken and done, and now all the consequences of my words and actions—has it all been worth it?

And some days, don't you and I ask the same plaintive questions? Yearn to know whether it's all worth it? I'm talking about the challenges we face following Jesus in faith. I'm talking about the words and actions our Lord Jesus calls us to in this life of ours, then the consequences of obeying his commands, and whether it's all worth it. For how hard it is to return love for evil . . . to live with less and give generously in a consumer culture . . . to be patient and not grumble even when annoyances annoy . . . to seek reconciliation when walking away would be our first inclination . . . to stop averting our eyes to the needs of people around us and really do something for them. We're going on faith that Jesus **is** the Messiah, the promised Emmanuel, God –with-us, but some days it is just plain hard to follow him. And so we wonder, along with John the Baptist, "Are you the one, Jesus? Tell us it's all worth it!"

Jesus answered John's query, sent a message back to him in prison. Only it wasn't a simple yes or no. Jesus pointed not back at himself as the answer, but instead to the signs going on around him wherever he went: "*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*"

Jesus may **not** have come into our world as the One wreaking vengeance on evildoers, like John the Baptist pictured or wanted. Instead, his response to John proclaimed that with his advent, something else was happening, something big. In the person of Jesus, God was at work doing something new for the world, but it was unexpected and easily misunderstood. I like the way Pastor Mary Hinkle puts it—she wrote, “John’s expectation of the Messiah might have been too vengeful; our (expectation) is likely too small.”

Can you and I, like John the Baptist, still look down that shimmering road with a sense of urgency and yearning? Only, this time, can we think big? Can we look for the signs that Jesus told his disciples and John to look for? Those signs are all around us, even 2,000 years later. Sometimes those signs are right on our doorstep.

Many of you know one of our long-time Trinity members, Deb Miller. For several years Deb was one of our preschool playgroup teachers here, but a few years back she began to teach at the Nativity School in Harrisburg. The Nativity School is a place where middle school boys from low-income families can receive a solid education in a structured, faith-based, nurturing environment before they head on to high school. Isn’t it neat that it’s called the Nativity School? I think of Jesus’ birth, Jesus’ nativity—and for these young boys, going to the Nativity School, with the opportunities it provides, is like being given a chance at life.

These kids live in some of the poorest, roughest sections of Harrisburg. Their families cannot afford private education for them, but because these boys have expressed a real desire to learn, to grow, to want to stay off the streets and out of prison, they then have opportunity to attend the Nativity School. In a real sense, they’re looking down that shimmering road and hoping, yearning for a different future from what their culture or neighborhood or, sometimes, even their own home life threatens to pull them into.

Now, while Deb mostly teaches 8th grade boys, she has taken on a new role this year. The Joshua Group, another fine program that mentors at-risk youth, had a small home available in Harrisburg. Leaders at the Nativity School were given opportunity to make use of that home. See, there are a few boys at the school for whom going home at the end of the day is not the best option. In fact, it’s safe to say that what was happening—or not happening—at home in the evening was undoing the good that was happening during the school day. A few boys simply needed a stable home life, a decent supper, support and help with homework, a positive outlet for exercise, breakfast to begin the morning, a good night’s sleep. So, Sunday through Thursday, Deb Miller and another teacher staff this house so a small group of middle-school boys can have that stable home life. When I talked with Deb Tuesday evening, she was busy cooking supper while the boys were at basketball practice. She’ll sometimes do a few loads of laundry. She’ll tutor them in their schoolwork. She’ll encourage them to help tutor each other. Deb and the other teacher rotate their schedule so they can each tend to their own families, but in a sense, these boys are their family, too. Deb says she even occasionally gets called “Mom.”

But don’t paint it as an entirely “Ozzie and Harriet” existence. There are moments when the boys ask themselves, “Is it all worth it? Is what I’m dealing with in order to have a different future worth it?” For there are challenges as they look down that shimmering road. They have to be willing to wear a uniform each day, willing to run the gauntlet as they walk to and from

school, enduring some taunts and ridicule. Deb admits the boys will kind-of hide under their sweatshirts hoods, hoping they don't get noticed as they walk the rough streets. It must be hard to hold onto dreams when what you see and experience morning and night seems so contrary to the new life you yearn for. And there is such a sense of defeatism and despair in those neighborhoods that even the boys' parents get caught up in it. There's this tension of wanting something better for their sons than the public schools and neighborhoods offer, and then feeling wholly inadequate as a family: "What—we're not good enough for you? What we have, what we're providing isn't good enough for you?" And so, over and over again, the boys (and consequently their families) have to be encouraged by Deb and others at the Nativity School not to get an education so that they can leave their communities, but get an education, so they can come back and embrace their communities and lift them up. Then this nativity, this birth and new life will be expansive, not exclusive.

Yet even the teachers and staff will occasionally find themselves wondering, "Is it all worth it?" Deb aches that one of her boys never graduated, but went to prison for crime. She doesn't know the exact future awaiting these middle school boys, what effect her teaching and caring and nurturing will have on these boys. And some days are just exhausting and frustrating. So because the fruits of her work cannot always be measured, she will wonder sometimes if her efforts are worth it. And if it wasn't for her belief that her Lord Jesus has called her to this place, that what she's doing here is following Jesus as his disciple, it would be a more difficult task indeed. Deb says she simply has to do her work faithfully both at the Nativity School and in that home, and trust the outcome to God.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Like John the Baptist, we might wonder if it is all worth it—to live our lives in hope and expectation on the basis of a promise that there will be a nativity, a birth, a new creation. Well, says Jesus, just look for the signs—in fact, go ahead and be in active pursuit of those signs: Signs of good news brought to the poor, freedom for those who are bound, healing for those laid low by pain, new life for those who thought they were good as dead. See these things, be the bearer of these things in the name of Jesus, and you realize it's all worth it.

This Advent, look down the shimmering road and follow the figure who beckons us on it—Jesus. He is the One. **AMEN.**