

"Look for Yourself"

Third Sunday of Advent
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

8:15 and 11:00 a.m. Sunday, December 12, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Matthew 11:2-11

The last light of day had flickered out, and the prison was left in total darkness. Several of the prisoners already were asleep on the cold, stone floor. But one intense young man was still very much awake. He had much on his mind. Oblivious to the cold and to the damp and to the hard stone, he lay on his back in the darkness, his wiry hands clasped tightly behind his head, reflecting; trying to sort out all the pieces of the puzzle; trying to understand what it all meant.

He knew his life had been different. All of his life he had been driven by one overwhelming ambition, one overriding compulsion. From birth, throughout his childhood and young manhood, all his life, everything he had said and everything he had done and everything he had been focused on what he believed to be his destiny. He had been absolutely confident, totally sure.

But lately . . . lately doubts had begun to worm into his absolute confidence. Lately, questions had begun to cast clouds over his total assurance. Being in prison was no problem -- he had been imprisoned before. The physical discomfort, even the torture, he could stand. But the termites that were beginning to eat up into his psyche, they were more than he could take. He had to regain his confidence. He had to be reassured again, that what he was about was real and true and right. He thought he was fulfilling his destiny. But now, after these questions of conscience and value, he had to know. He had to be sure. Finally, fitfully, he fell asleep in the cold.

The intense young man in prison was John, John the Baptist, and he lived his whole life with the obsession that he was supposed to prepare the way for the long-expected Messiah. John had been led to live the ascetic, prophetic life, following the life-style of the great prophet Elijah. He lived in the wilderness, ate simply and sparingly; spent large tracts of time in meditation, and hardened both his body and his will. John was led to recognize his cousin, Jesus, as the One God had promised. He went among the people, teaching them that a new life was possible, encouraging them to repent, to turn from their former patterns and turn toward a new pattern of life based on belief and baptism. He himself baptized Jesus and heard from above the word proclaiming Jesus to be the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah.

Yet, something was not resting well with John. And his time in prison was just intensifying it, whatever it was. Once he had been so sure, so very sure. But now . . .

The problem was, you see, Jesus wasn't acting like how John thought the Messiah ought to act. John knew, of course, that not everyone had to go around like he did, wearing animal skins and eating strange things. But Jesus was a regular partier. He enjoyed banquets and good food and fine wine. And it didn't seem, well, appropriate. Then, too, John thought the Messiah was supposed to take over the government, to restore Israel to the glory days of great King David. But Jesus

wouldn't even say a word about government or revolution. And worst of all, John was convinced that the Messiah would preach real fire and brimstone; really give it to those sinners. But Jesus kept talking in little homey stories, calling God "our Father" and teaching that God's love is more immediate than God's wrath.

John had trouble swallowing all of that. Here was this guy, his own kith and kin, supposed to be the Messiah, supposed to be the Son of God who had been promised by God to his ancestors and expected for centuries, supposed to be the one for whom his own entire life was dedicated and focused, and what if he wasn't? What if it were all a colossal mistake? What if this Jesus was only another itinerant rabbi, a good, fine man to be sure, but no different than a thousand other itinerant rabbis? What if?

We probably don't think of John the Baptist as "Doubting John." That's a moniker we reserve for Thomas, as he is portrayed in the Gospel of John. But here in Matthew we witness the doubt and fear that had John by the throat as he lay in that miserable prison. So, when he finally decided that he could stand it no longer, he sent some of his own followers to see Jesus and to talk with him, to put the question to Jesus that was in his heart and on his mind so much. "Tell us," they ask Jesus on John's behalf, "are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" "Tell me you really are who I've been telling everyone you are," that's what John needed to know.

And Jesus' answer? Well, it is not only interesting, but instructive even for us living some 2,000 years later. Jesus answered back, taking words and phrases from the prophecy of Isaiah we also heard this morning: "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." "For crying out loud," Jesus is saying, "What do you see? Open your ears, open your eyes, open your hearts."

Presumably, John's followers went back to the prison and told John about their experience and Jesus' words. We don't know what happened next to John's anxieties. Scripture is silent as to whether John is reassured before Herod has him killed.

Now, there is a hint of tragedy for me in this story, and I don't just mean because John's head was served as dessert at a banquet. I mean here was this fellow who lived his whole life in devotion to his calling, to prepare the world for the Christ. And then, things seemed to fall apart for him. John began to doubt it all -- himself, Jesus, his mission, his own life.

And I think I feel bad because I know what doubt can do. Maybe I feel bad because I have known the weight of it on my own heart and soul and have heard enough of your stories to know that many of you have felt it too, at times. Doubt is very real; and honest doubt, honest questions, honest wrestlings, are all very important to anyone who is serious about their faith.

It seems to me that our doubts are very much of the nature of John's. If Jesus isn't the Lord, if he is just another itinerant rabbi, then the entire Christian religion is a fraud. It is based on hypocrisy and follows a charlatan. If Jesus isn't the Lord, then our faith is a sham, and we are, of all peoples, the most to be pitied,

paraphrasing St. Paul a bit. If Jesus isn't the Lord, then we are wasting our time here, and not only our time, but our very lives.

But . . . but, if Jesus is who he says he is; if Jesus is, in fact, the long-awaited Messiah, if Jesus is our Lord, our Redeemer, our Savior, then we'd better believe it with every ounce of energy and every fiber of our being. If Jesus is the Son of the living God, then we'd better think like it and speak like it and act like it and live like it is really true.

You see, Jesus' answer to John's doubts and questions is the same answer he has for us. He made the blind to see. He still does -- he makes the morally blind, the emotionally blind, the spiritually blind to see beyond themselves and to see others. He made the deaf to hear. He still does, for those with ears to hear. He makes the socially deaf to hear the pleas of human needs and the religiously deaf to hear the still small voice of God that calls us to live not just for ourselves, but in Christ's name, for others.

Jesus understood honest doubt. He still does. Sincere, honest, open searching is a way God continues to reach us. Our hearts are open in the asking of the questions. Our minds are made sharp in the focusing of our concerns. To be a person of faith does not mean that we have to check our brains at the door, with our coats and hats.

But Jesus takes our questions and our proddings and our searchings and says to us: "Look for yourself. What do you see?"

And what do we see? I see people of faith growing in the Spirit of Christ bringing gifts for a Giving Tree, knowing they will never see the joy in the faces of those who will receive those gifts. I witness people everyday struggling with how they should live in the midst of pain and confusion. I hear messages of hope and good news from you as some of you live with loss and disease. I hear and see Jesus calling us to lives of service and witness in his name. I experience the hands and heart of Jesus through the many and varied outreach ministries of this church that proclaim God's love in a world that desperately needs to hear and see that message. Jesus continues to say: "Look for yourself. I am who I claim to be and those with eyes to see and ears to hear will discover that."

My friends in Christ, this advent as we await the birth of our Savior into our homes and hearts again this year, what do you see? In the midst of this busy season, it is worth taking the time for a good, honest, hard look.

AMEN.