

Dec 14 Third Sunday of Advent Year A SERMON

[Isaiah 35:1-10](#)

[Canticle 15](#)

[James 5:7-10](#)

[Matthew 11:2-11](#)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer

Did you go out to the wilderness to look at a reed shaken by the wind? I wonder what Jesus meant by that. Maybe he meant, did you go out to be in nature and watch the reeds blowing in the wind?

A reed shaken in the wind might have to do with someone who could be easily persuaded with each toss of the wind. During the time of Herod Antipas coins sometimes featured reeds, so was it a reference to Herod's fickleness? Maybe, because Jesus also referenced soft robes, as if the expectation was to see royalty. Or maybe Jesus is asking if they expected to see the same wavering of Herod in John.

Or better yet, as a prophet on the edge of the end of one age and the beginning of another, John's convictions were sound. He would not be persuaded as the blowing of the wind. So maybe they went out to the wilderness to hear a prophet who was sure and steady, unshakable. And if that was the case, what was their intention upon hearing such a man? And how did it impact their lives? More on this in a bit.

As strong as John is in his convictions though, John also is human like us. A few chapters ago he was absolutely sure of who Jesus was. I need to be baptized by you John told Jesus. And as Jesus was baptized the heavens opened up, John saw the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus, and he heard the voice say, this is my beloved Son. John knows he is preparing the way of the one the prophets foretold. John knows Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. And he knows Jesus is the one. I must decrease as Jesus increases, he emphasizes.

But now circumstances have changed for John. He is in prison with a death sentence saddling up next to him. Is he having second thoughts about Jesus being the one? Is he wondering if everything he experienced was a dream? Is he wondering if he imagined all that?

Do we ever wonder that ourselves? Does our human side sometimes wonder where God is in the circumstances we find ourselves in? And John found himself in quite a state and his expectations did not align with who he thought the Messiah would be.

So he sends word to Jesus to ask, Wait, did I get it wrong? Are you the one? Might there be another? I'm in prison here. This is not how I thought this would go. I told everyone you are the Lamb of God. Somethings need to change around here.

Last week we heard John talking of the Messiah as one whose winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. "You brood of vipers!" he called out to the religious he had judged unworthy, not bearing fruit worthy of repentance.

John was fierce in his convictions, of who Jesus was and how he thought Jesus would act. Perhaps he thought the burning of the chaff would mean the end of the oppressor's rule and those that were part of the empire

would be swept away, and yet here he sits in prison. Maybe John is thinking that as the Messiah, shouldn't this oppression end with one sweep of the winnowing fork, blowing the oppressors, the chaff, away, gathering only the wheat?

But what if, what if that is not the chaff that gets blown away? What if when Isaiah said in last week's reading, "the wolf shall live with the lamb, God was referring to the redemption of all creation, even humanity, all of humanity... that the whole earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord? That when the Lord shall strike the earth with the rod of God's mouth, and with the breath of God's lips, the wickedness that is killed, is our own sinfulness and ignorance, the sinfulness and ignorance of humanity? What if when Jesus says, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, that is our own weeping and regret when we understand how our own choices and behaviors and thoughts have been a harming force?

What if the real circumcision is a matter of the heart, as Paul says it is in his letter to the Romans. And what if in Isaiah when the waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert, those are the wilderness and desert places of our own hearts? That the wilderness and the dry land that shall be glad, and the desert that shall rejoice and blossom, is the state of our own selves?

What did you go out to the desert to see? Jesus might ask the same question to us today. Maybe worded a little differently. What did you go to Grace Church to see or more broadly, why does anyone go to any church? Because the deeper question is what is the intention and how does it impact our lives.

Rather than getting ready for a baby in a bassinet, each year, here in the midst of Advent we are confronted with this wild man in the wilderness, calling the church go-ers a brood of vipers. And we might be caught off guard to be asked what our intentions are as we prepare our hearts for the savior to be born. But Jesus wasn't just born into a barn all those years ago, Jesus was, and is, born into our very hearts and Jesus isn't just someone we hope for at the end of all things.

Jesus is here and now. The kingdom of heaven is upon us now. Maybe we don't always see our circumstances change, the way John did not, but Jesus is here now and so the question is how does that change our behavior, our thoughts, our ways? How does being reminded each year, in this season of Advent, of Jesus born all those years ago in a town called Bethlehem transform our hearts.

Our letter from James reminds its readers, they must be patient. Like the farmer waits, whether waiting for the new season to begin or waiting for the crops to grow, there is a hopeful expectation that those seeds, that cannot be seen, there in the earth, are transforming in the darkness.

And while we wait here and now, in this season of Advent, this season of waiting, of patience, of preparation, as we prepare our houses for the one who is to come, let us also prepare our hearts. James's letter says strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, he encourages them, do not grumble against one another. Such a simple thing to ask. But even back then they must have needed that reminder, even being so close to the life of Jesus, they needed that encouragement and so do we or at least I do, maybe you all don't grumble. But if you do and you need this kind of encouragement, turn with me to our collect for the day and let us pray it out loud together.

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. **Amen.**

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