

Matthew 11:2-15
Third Sunday in Advent
December 14, 2025

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This morning's Introit began with a monumental word:

"Rejoice!" What is so important, so special about that word? It's a word – marked by the *pink* candle on that traditional Advent wreath (unlike the two purple candles before it) – it's a word that (you could say) has a different tense, a different viewpoint, than other Advent themes preceding it. The word associated with the **first** Advent candle is the word "hope." The **second** candle? – peace, or in some traditions, faith, or even love. Think of the progression: Hope looks to the future and, when confident in the promise, can live in peace, faith, love... even as the thing promised is still anticipated. But *joy* arrives (**third** candle), rejoicing ensues, when the promise can actually be seen coming to pass, even if still on the horizon. When the fulfillment of that long-awaited promise of God's *grace* (Greek: *caris*) commences, then the emotion tied to that grace, *joy* (*cara*) commences as well (The commencing of joy depends on the commencing of grace.) And that 'threshold' of moving from future hope to present joy is where John and his disciples find themselves in

this text, isn't it? And it's where Jesus tells the crowds *they* are at – that's what they went to see, isn't it? And, it's where Jesus tells you *you* are at... living not as adherents of some dusty, distant past, or as those who merely hope in a distant future, but as joyful beneficiaries of a present Savior and the salvation He continues to lavish upon you.

Another way to 'set the stage' for this text and its meditation: If the first Sunday in Advent was the juxtaposition of Christ's second and first coming, and if the second Sunday in Advent was the call to prepare the way in repentant anticipation of the coming Christ, then today – the third Sunday in Advent – is to hear the news that the divinely-appointed forerunner is on the scene, the Christ immediately on his heels, so that our joy in the fulfilled promises of Old are about to burst forth anew as we near that annual proclamation-anew that the incarnate Christ has come into the world, just as long promised.

In meditating upon our text, many want to spend time asking whether John asked the question *for himself* (was he near despair, for he languished in prison?) or *for his disciples* (was he still pointing to the Christ, even from prison?). Others want to say John in prison is simply allegorical for 'the sinner in bondage to sin.'

All of that is a distraction from what is really the point of this text. The point ought not be the motive of the *question*, but the motive of the answer. What is Jesus proclaiming when he commands

John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see"? And what is Jesus doing when he focuses the crowd on John's reputation?

The first thing we ought note is that Jesus commands the messengers to tell John what they *hear* and *see*. The hearing aspect of this may seem odd, for John sent them in the first place precisely because of what he had *heard* (first verse of our text: "Now when John heard in prison"). But, *their* hearing is tied to the seeing. That's important! For, seeing is a very present tense sense. I cannot *see*, but only *recall*, what is **past**; and I cannot *see*, but may only *hope in*, what is **future**. But, I can be commanded to report what I see as I see it *in the present*. And, if it is "in the present, here and now" that I see the works of the Christ, then the question of whether we should expect another is answered and silenced, isn't it?

... especially when Jesus helps the disciples put two-and-two together with what they are seeing: "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 is not *coaching* and *coaxing* them to see things that aren't there! Their own eyes have seen this starting to happen in human history. He's teaching them to make sense of it and describe it rightly. They of themselves *could have* gone back to John and described it in their *own* words. But, by summarizing it all through the prophet Isaiah, Jesus brings clarity to what they see and what they will confess to John: the prophets are – the Old Testament is –

being fulfilled. The ‘deeds of the Christ’ John heard of in prison (notice, the text doesn’t say he heard of the deeds of *Jesus*; he heard of the deeds of the long-promised Christ)... deeds that had never previously been done because they could only be done by the Messiah long-promised by God, and yet, these very ‘deeds of the Christ’ are now being done *by Jesus of Nazareth* so that not only does John *hear* about them, but his disciples *see* the deeds of the Christ for themselves, which of course means it is now undeniable: the long-awaited Christ of God is now on the scene, and he is this man Jesus. Jesus *is* the Christ. That’s the whole point of him doing miracles, isn’t it? – “I am the Christ!”

And yet, Jesus adds one somewhat cryptic conclusion to his response: “And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” What does he mean by that? Who would be offended by the Messiah? The one finally come from God, long-promised through all the prophecies... those prophecies that never before nor ever after could be fulfilled by anyone except the Messiah, but now are coming to flesh-and-blood life in the fulfillment Jesus brings... why would anyone be offended by, and not just celebrate, such a glorious truth?!

Isn’t the answer simply because such glorious beauty of the prophecies being fulfilled would include not so-glorious sights of the Messiah being rejected by men (as Isaiah said), a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, one from whom men hide their faces, who

hand him over with the transgressors and put him to death with the wicked?

And, what is true of the Master – is it not also to be expected of those who follow Him? If the Messiah brings with Him the theology of the cross, should not those who follow Him expect crosses of their own? Not crosses of salvation (that happened *once*), but crosses borne because of their confession... crosses that may equally lead to imprisonment and death like John. Not an arrest and death to justify and redeem, but an arrest and death of which the Christian need not be offended nor afraid because he *is justified* and *redeemed*. So, John, blessed is the one who is not offended by the Christ to whom you yourself pointed all men, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

Now, as John’s disciples depart to bring word to *him*, Jesus turns to the crowds and is certainly not offended/embarrassed by John, but vindicates John’s entire ministry, his pointing, his purpose. This is important for us to notice because we so often want to put ourselves in the shoes of someone in the text, and we’re tempted to lean into this debate about John possibly doubting because we can sympathize with that and want to put ourselves in his shoes as the one who is doubting and will be reassured.

But that’s not the point of the text! Don’t put yourselves in the shoes of John, but in the shoes of the crowd. For when Jesus

inquires of *them*, does he not inquire of your heart as well: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see?”

You may not think of yourself as ‘going out into the wilderness to see John,’ but every year you hear his preaching: always the second Sunday in Advent ,and you also go out to see him at the Baptism of Jesus and in early Epiphany. And when you hear him, when he calls you to repentance and points you to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, what is he? – a reed shaken by the wind? That’s obviously not how any of us would describe John – some weak-knee-ed ‘hold your finger to the wind so as to be liked by the crowds’ pushover... not this John, who called the religious leaders a brood of vipers, he who warned all hearers to flee from the wrath to come, he who unwaveringly called King Herod to repentance for his adultery. It’s impossible to think of John as one pushed to and fro by the whims of itching ears that want to be entertained.

So, “What did you go out to see?” Jesus asks again – A man dressed in soft clothing? In other words, a man interested in his own comfortable lifestyle, his own high-class status, doing whatever needs to expediently be done to make sure he is personally well-off? That certainly doesn’t characterize this John languishing in prison.

(By the way, these ought be standards to which you hold your pastors as well. Understandably, we always run to the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3, but a pastor shaken by worry

over people's itching ears ought not be in the pulpit; and a pastor more worried about his comfort or personal status than about the truth of the Gospel ought be ignored for the hireling he is.)

But, that application of the Office of the Holy Ministry aside, notice how Jesus not only asks us to weigh what *we* think of John, but also validates in our hearing John's entire ministry and purpose. Jesus asks a final time:

"What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and **more than** a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'"

Pause for a minute and think of what Jesus says there. John is *more* than a prophet... for all the prophets prophesied regarding a future for which they themselves did not have a timeline. If you will, they prophesied into the darkness of the future because they were firmly and squarely part of the Old, anticipating, Testament.

But John is the flesh-and-blood indicator that the long-awaited Christ is arriving. You might say, John is the hinge between Old Testament and New Testaments. John is the only person outside of Christ who is famously prophesied by those prophets of old; even his own birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth is foretold! How important is John – Elijah to come!... so that, with the arrival of John the forerunner, the long-awaited Christ is about to enter the scene, and no one and nothing in history can prevent it.

In fact, this proper relationship, this intimate ‘lead act’ followed by the ‘main event’ is exactly what Jesus gets at when he chooses to quote the prophecy as he does: “This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’” Notice the unique nature of that quote: the *messenger* (John) isn’t even the main focus of the verse, but points to and prepares the way for *another*.

So, yes, crowds, John is Elijah who is to come into human history; but that means something far more important. It means the Jesus to whom John points is truly the Christ to come into history.

Jesus isn’t just defending John’s reputation and status, is he? He is pointing to himself. For those who follow Christ have something far better than those who want to remain focused on John... which, of course, John himself eagerly proclaimed when declaring Jesus the Lamb of God, but also eagerly confessed when saying of their relational roles, “He must increase; I must decrease.”

John knew his role was forerunner; his work was preparatory. He knew the great truth Jesus speaks of when he says, “Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Isn’t Jesus saying *there* precisely what John himself said *elsewhere*, constantly calling people to be baptized because in

baptism is the far greater birth. John may be greatest born of woman, but the child of baptism is born of God!

How does the apostle John say it in His gospel?: “To all who believed on His name, he gave the right to become children of God, born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but [born] of God.” And, just a few verses later, how is one born of God and begotten from above? – “born of water and the Spirit.” There’s baptism. “That which is born of flesh is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” There’s baptism and (as we heard last week) the baptismal life. The life that yields the fruit of the Spirit, lives and breathes repentance and forgiveness, and bears fruit in keeping with repentance. Isn’t that what John was preparing you for? To be pointed to and recognize and *rejoice in* the Christ who came into history, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and who baptized you into the birth far greater than being born of woman, but being born of God, a child of God, an heir of God.

Thus, what reason to *rejoice* this third Sunday in Advent when, once in history, Jesus could point the crowds to John and interpret for them what they had gone out to see: in seeing the forerunner, they were (if you will) seeing the dawn of the age of the Christ... an age in which you live, the year of our Lord 2025. And, in annually hearing the account of the forerunner, you are reminded that once in history, God’s forerunner momentarily took center stage

to prepare the way for the Christ who was finally, after thousands of years of anticipation in divine promises, the Christ was *finally* arriving in human time and history. And to accomplish a messianic mission that *still today pours out its benefit*. Who cares that John is the only other one ever to be prophesied of in the books of the prophets. You – having been born of God – your name is written in the book of life. From here on and forevermore, “*rejoice* in the Lord always, I say again, *rejoice*.”

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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December 14, 2025