

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
 "More than a prophet"

Scripture: Luke 7:18-35; Isaiah 35

Hymns: Oh for a thousand tongues to sing 374 Open our eyes Lord 445 (Praise:
 Therefore the Redeemed of the Lord, Cry of my heart, I desire Jesus) Blest be the
 God of Israel 752,
 February 12, 2017
 Rev. Steve Filyk

Have you ever encountered a situation of suffering or loss
 And thought to yourself,
 I'd lose my faith in God
 If THAT ever happened to me?

A friend develops ALS.
 A co-worker's partner has an affair.
 A neighbor loses their grandson in an automobile accident.

Have you ever encountered a situation of suffering or loss
 And thought to yourself,
 I'd lose my faith in God
 If THAT ever happened to me?

My guess is that most of us
 Have had these thoughts
 At one time or another.

But let me ask another question...

Has there ever been an event, an experience
 That has prevented you wholeheartedly embracing God?
 From putting your trust in Jesus?

Maybe you've been through one of these tragedies
 And you haven't been able to square
 Your pain with those promises you read in the Bible.

You feel that God has let you down.

And so you are waiting for God to make good,
 To prove God's faithfulness and love,
 Before you will ever trust again.

Has there been an event, an experience
 That has prevented you wholeheartedly embracing God?
 From putting your trust in Jesus?

Well if I'm talking about you please don't feel ashamed

The greatest men of the Bible,
 The greatest women of faith
 had their doubts and their questions about God.

Just consider today's Gospel lesson.

Today we hear how John the Baptist
 Sends his disciples to Jesus
 With questions about his identity:

"Are you the One we've been expecting,
 or are we still waiting [for another]?"ⁱ

This is the same John the Baptist
 That the country-folk and city-folk
 Had been heading out into the wilderness to listen to,

The same John that Jesus describes
 As the greatest prophet that had ever been born.

Today we hear how this John
 Is having doubts that Jesus is the Messiah.

Even after witnessing the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus,
 Even after declaring that Jesus surpasses him,
 Even after hearing all the stories
 Of the miracles Jesus was doing...

John has his doubts and questions.ⁱⁱ

So why does John have trouble trusting Jesus?

Maybe it's because John is in prison.

Earlier in the Gospel we are told
That John has been jailed for speaking truth to power:
He criticised King Herod for marrying his own sister-in-law.ⁱⁱⁱ

Maybe it's the hardship of prison
That gives John doubts about Jesus.
When life gets difficult we often question God.

Of course what we know about John
is that he has no trouble with hardship,
he makes his home in the wilderness,
has locusts with honey for breakfast.

Given all these experiences,
You'd think prison would be a breeze.

Maybe his problem isn't prison.
Maybe his trouble comes from the fact
That his imprisonment prevents him
From being able to see Jesus,
And witness those miracles first-hand.

Some of us have our own doubts
About the reports, the stories,
We read in our Bibles.
Seeing IS believing.

But remember that John isn't a child of modernism.
His world isn't closed to God's intrusions.
The people back then expected it.

So if he can believe that Jesus IS doing miracles
Then what is his problem?

It would seem to have something to do with his expectations
About what the Messiah is all about.

You see by Jesus' time "the focus of Jewish hope
had become mainly political.
Many Jews expected a Messiah
who would deliver them from their Roman oppressors
and reduce the burden of taxation."

The same John the Baptism who urged people to repent
And embrace righteousness
Would have been expecting this kind of Messiah
To clean house in the political world.

Just consider the sermon that John preached earlier in Luke.
Speaking of the Messiah, John says:

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
His winnowing fork is in his hand,
to clear his threshing floor
and to gather the wheat into his granary;
but the chaff

he will burn with unquenchable fire."^{iv}

John has big political expectations for the Messiah.
But what is Jesus actually doing?

Well he's not challenging Herod, at least not directly.
No, Jesus is caring for blind and the deaf,
The sick and the lame.

And while these miracles testify to God's power,
Herod is still lounging around in his palace.
And John is languishing in chains.
The world has yet to be set right!

John's problem is that "[Jesus] was not acting the way
John thought [the] Savior would act.

The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world
was not taking Herod's sin away..."^v

Today's Gospel lesson shows us
 that the greatest prophet in history
 Has questions, doubts about Jesus.

So what is Jesus' response?

Jesus doesn't answer directly:
 'Stop looking, I'm the Messiah.'
 OR 'Keeping searching I'm not your man.'

Jesus says "Go back and tell John
 what you have just seen and heard:

The blind see,
 The lame walk,
 Lepers are cleansed,

The deaf hear,
 The dead are raised,
 The wretched of the earth
 have God's... hospitality extended to them."^{vi}

Jesus doesn't answer John directly.
 But he gives John reason to reconsider his own expectations.

To see more clearly
 what Jesus IS doing
 Not what he ISN'T doing.

I think few of us have many political expectations for Jesus.

We have won the global lottery,
 And are living in one of the safest, freest nations on earth.
 Added to this most of us are comfortably middle-class.

Few of us have many political expectations for Jesus.
 And yet I think that each of us have our own little list
 Of what we think Jesus should be doing.

We betray this when we say:
 'If this ever happened,
 I'd lose my faith in God.'

We betray this when we think,
 Until this happens,
 I can't really believe.

We want God to live up to OUR expectations,
 To prove that God is worthy of our trust.

But does Jesus ask John,
 'What can I do to prove myself to you?'
 No Jesus simply says, 'Look at all I am doing!'

It was 1995.
 I was in my last semester at the University of Alberta
 And I was preparing to enjoy a holiday:
 Reading Break.

But Friday evening I received a call from my aunt.
 She said I needed to go home,
 To head home immediately.
 She told me that my sister had died.

Laurel was a couple years older than me.
 She was smart, she was pretty.
 But for her, life wasn't easy.

Growing up, she didn't like our small town
 And so she went off to a boarding school.
 After graduating she tried College
 But some came home, overwhelmed.

The mental illness
 That was chasing her as a child
 Grabbed hold of her as she became an adult.
 And her hopes for life began to fade away.

Now she received the best wisdom of our medical system:
Doctors, psychiatrists, hospital programs.

She received the best nurture of her family and church:
She was the recipient of our love and prayers.

But Laurel didn't get well.
She didn't get better
And after years of trying to cope
She ended it all, on Valentine's Day.

This was for me,
My first real experience of loss,
My first encounter with tragedy.

It shattered my faith,
My expectations for God.

Shouldn't Laurel have been victorious,
Just like her name suggests?
Laurel—that wreath they give to champions.

Shouldn't God have answered our prayers?
We said so many...
Doesn't God want us to enjoy the world
That God created for us?

All of a sudden the world grew dark, ugly.
It seemed that God had abandoned us,
That God had abandoned her.

And yet through the weeks that followed,
There was something I couldn't help but notice.
I couldn't help but notice

The many kindnesses that were shown to my family.

People from the church came over,
Just to spend time with us, to grieve with us.
People from the community, even strangers,
Brought gifts of food and flowers.

Somehow in the middle of all those dashed expectations
About life, about God's protection, about a promising future,
I couldn't deny that God was somehow present there.

Have you ever encountered a situation of suffering or loss
And thought to yourself,
I'd lose my faith in God
If THAT ever happened to me?

Have you been through an experience
where God hasn't lived up to your expectations
Where your best hopes have been shattered?

Well could it be that while God doesn't do everything WE want,
Doesn't live up to OUR expectations,
That somehow God is somehow still present with us?
Caring for us,
creating a promising future?

Maybe like John,
we need stop worrying about what we think
Jesus SHOULD be doing

And with the simple trust of a child welcome what Jesus IS doing...

May God give us this trust.
May God bless us with faith. Amen.

i Luke 7:18 MSG

iiii While Luke is silent about John's presence at Jesus' baptism (it seems to happen after John is imprisoned), the Gospel of John makes this plain. See John 1.

iii See "Herodias: Queen of Galilee" www.britannica.com/biography/Herodias

iv Luke 3:16-17 NRSV

v Mark E. Yurs "Matthew 11:2-11, Homiletical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.*

vi Luke 7:21-23 MSG