

Advent 3A: Matthew 11.2-11

December 14, 2025

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There's an old joke about a guy stumbling around under a streetlight in search of his car keys. The cop who's helping him look says, "Are you sure this is where you lost them?" And the guy says, "No. I lost them back there in the alley, but the light's better over here."

Is there anybody else in the room who tends to go looking for what they need, not where it's most likely to be found, but in a place where we'd rather do our looking? Well, even if I'm the only one besides our friend in the joke who does, that's what this sermon's about. Let's say it's about meeting God in a dark alley. Which kind of makes me wish we had one of those snazzy lighted signs out front that shout sermon titles at passers-by.

Sometimes it's not enough to be a seeker. Sometimes it matters where you do your looking.

Now John the Baptist bears approximately none of the familiar marks of the modern seeker. Seekers are supposed to be open minded, non-judgmental, comfortable with ambiguity and silence and all that. John prefers loud declarations to thoughtful questions. Judgment isn't just something he tolerates. It's his medium of choice. When he storms onto the scene in Matthew chapter three, he's yelling about vipers and stones and axes and the wrath to come. He doesn't seem to be a terribly reflective kind of guy. I doubt he was a very good listener.

So, it's really not all that surprising to find John the Baptist in jail nine chapters later. But it is a little surprising to hear him ask a nervous question. He sends word to Jesus asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" A lot has transpired since Jesus's baptism. Enough apparently to crack John open just a bit. And a little ray of doubt shines in.

Here is essentially what's happened. After his baptism by John, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Afterwards, he collects a few disciples, and then preaches the Sermon on the Mount. For three chapters Jesus gives us the essence of what life in the new age he's ushering in should look like. True blessedness, he says, doesn't look like any blessedness we've ever gone looking for. It's present in the meek, the poor, the persecuted, the mourning. He insists that radical forgiveness, nonresistance, and even generosity to evildoers and thieves and beggars are to mark the new order. He tells us to remove the log from our own eye before going after that speck in our neighbor's. And he says that living this way is hard. It's a narrow gate, not the wide, easy road. He says his peaceable ways will seem very strange and

even offensive to a violent world. They will separate fathers from sons and daughters from mothers. They might even cost you your life, he says.

Then Jesus comes down from the mountain and heals a leper, then a paralytic, then a woman with a fever. He goes out in a boat and calms a storm. He casts out a few demons. He dines with some tax collectors and sinners, one of whom, Matthew, he invites into his innermost circle. He raises a dead girl, cures a hemorrhaging woman and two blind men, casts out another demon. Then he gives power to his disciples to do the same. Such is Jesus's life between his baptism and John's question from prison, according to Matthew. Why might all of this lead to a moment of doubt?

Well, the miracles are cool, but imagine seeing things from John the Baptist's prison cell. Obviously Jesus didn't quite get around to fixing everybody's troubles. John was in a bind. The powers that be have locked him up. They're about to do him in. And the only person who might be able to help—the one who can cast out evil spirits and tell the wind to stop blowing—is nowhere to be found. "Seriously?" John must have been thinking. "Making a few sick people well? Is that really how you undo the Roman Empire, which happens to have me under its heavy thumb right now?" Maybe it's not strange at all that John wondered whether he'd been wrong about this Jesus all along.

But Jesus's response is to say that we tend to look for what we need in the wrong places. In fact, he uses John the Baptist himself to prove his point. He asks the people around him what they found so compelling about this wilderness prophet and what they expected to see when they went out to meet him. A person in soft robes, dressed for success and at home in royal palaces and places of power? Or a guy who eats bugs, wears a camel's hide, and tells them the unvarnished truth, whatever the cost?

God, you see, was showing up in all the wrong places in this Jesus. Which meant the people who missed the kingdom probably missed it because they didn't know where to look. The lighting is so much better in palaces than it is in dive bars, after all.

So maybe this gospel is really a story less about what Jesus did than about where God showed up. Since he's a healer, we tend to think that wherever Jesus is, people are well. But the truth is about a hundred and eighty degrees from that. Jesus was spending his time with the conspicuously unwell. And the real problem is that when we begin to think that since Jesus is a healer then everybody near him must be healed, we quickly become something other than his church. You see, Jesus's healings weren't part of a public health initiative. They were signs. Signs that God was present in the last place anyone would ever think to look—among sad, sick, messed up lives like ours are at their worst, not their best.

Obviously, this story has implications for the work of the church. For our priorities and for our call to welcome the sick and the poor and the outcast. But there is a deeper, subtler, possibly even more powerful truth that you and I may need to hear today. That truth is that if Jesus lived among sick people and sinners, the reason we know he's among us is because we're sick, not because we're well. Don't get me

wrong. Powerful healings still happen among Jesus's people. But not always. Not everywhere. Not for everyone. And herein lies the good news, hidden where no one would think to look for it. What if we, as the church, became a people who were hopeful not because we've been healed, but because we're honest about our struggles and our ailments? What if we believed that Jesus was with us not because we're well, but because we know that we're all a little sick in one way or another, and Jesus has always had this curious affection for the ill?

Any Tom Waits lovers out there? If you don't know him, Tom Waits has a voice that makes Bob Dylan sound like Harry Belafonte. And when he's not singing about stirring his whiskey with a nail, he might be preaching the straight up gospel. Like, "There's a river by the trestle down by Sinner's Grove. Down where the willow and the dogwood grow... There's room for the forsaken. If you're there on time, you'll be washed of all your sins, and all of your crimes. Down there by the train..." The worst of humanity down end up at that river in the song. Mobsters and murders are there. He sees Judas Iscariot carrying John Wilkes Boothe. And then Tom Waits turns toward you, the listener, and growls, "If you've lost all your hope/ If you've lost all your faith/ I know you will be cared for/ I know you will be safe/ All of the shameful/ And all of the whores/ Even the soldier/ Who pierced the heart of the Lord/ Is down there ... where the train goes slow."

The people who were desperate enough for redemption to meet a wild-eyed prophet like John at the Jordan probably weren't comfortable, well-adjusted seekers whose lives were mostly put together. They must have looked more like that band of criminals and sinners down there by the train. And now that same John the Baptist—looking out at the world from behind bars, questioning his own prophecy, the very prophecy that drew those motley crowds—John looks more than ever like one of the forsaken ones, doesn't he? But in the upside-down hierarchies of the new age Jesus is announcing, it's the forsaken ones who come out on top. John is just the kind of wounded failure of a life God goes looking for to extend mercy and healing to first. And then Jesus turns the mercy cart over one more time and says this John who's just risen to the top by going to jail will be the least in the kingdom of blessed misfits Jesus has come to proclaim.

So don't go looking for God among the priests and the royalty of your age, the story seems to be telling us. Look for God among the sin sick souls that know they're in need of a little mercy. Maybe look for God in that sin sick corner of your own soul too.

And if you feel like maybe your life isn't quite broken down enough right now to be of interest to a God who extends mercy first with those who are in their last ditch... If you feel like your sins haven't been exotic enough, just the boring, standard issue resentments and simmering angers and small-time cruelties that do most of the day-to-day damage in this world, well maybe just bring that feeling. Bring whatever in you makes you feel unworthy or inadequate or uninteresting to God.

Because the liberating, gospel truth is not that God only loves flamboyant sinners either. It's that God is still saying to every last one of us, "It's not your circumstances or your station that I love. It's not your spectacular failures or your carefully curated goodness I long to draw near to. It's you. It's truly you. Can you set aside whatever you think I want you to be and meet me, just as you are, down there by the train?"