

Advent calls us not just to prepare for the joyous celebration of the birth of Christ but also, as our communion liturgy reminds us, to await the day when he will come again to judge the world in righteousness. We look around us and see so much for God to redeem that it can make us think—as every generation before us has thought—that Jesus must be coming soon, because we can't imagine the world getting any worse or weirder than it already is. Having instant access to every bit of bad news from every corner of the earth at every moment of every day may give us a skewed view of the world, but besides economic and environmental disasters, threats to health and safety, and endangered human rights, we have had some genuinely bizarre news cycles in recent years. You may have heard people deal with that absurdity by saying, “Well *that* wasn't on my bingo card...” about an invasion of murder hornets or a catastrophic asteroid getting too close for comfort or whatever some guy did in Florida this week. But for us to say, *I didn't expect that* begs the question, *What did we expect? What do we expect?* From our world, from each other, from God?

In today's gospel we find John the Baptist no longer in the wilderness preaching about repentance and the coming of the Lord, but in prison. In the part of the story we skipped, John criticized Herod for illegally marrying his brother's wife, so Herod put him in jail. First century prisons weren't meant for serving a term of punishment; they were where a person awaited either trial or execution. The conditions were abysmal and those who were incarcerated needed friends or family to visit to provide for their basic needs, because the guards did not. John's disciples are ministering to him while he is in prison, and it is through them that John hears what Jesus has been doing and asks if Jesus is the one who was to come, or whether they were to wait for another.

If we assume that the report John hears in prison is of what Matthew has just told us Jesus was doing, then it was instructing the disciples and sending them out to cure diseases and cast out unclean spirits, and Jesus himself teaching and proclaiming his message. This seems *not* to be what John expected of the Messiah, the Lord's anointed, the one who was supposed to be chosen by God to bring salvation to Israel. When *we* hear the word *salvation*, we are likely to think of spiritual matters and the saving of souls. But in Jesus' day, the people were waiting for God to save them from the much more practical perils inflicted on them by the Roman government that was occupying and oppressing them. It's no wonder that John, from his prison cell, wonders if he was correct in thinking that Jesus was the Messiah when Jesus has not made any dramatic effort to rescue the nation as a whole or even just to rescue John.

Jesus tells John's disciples to report back to him what they hear and see: *the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.* Jesus hasn't raised an army to achieve a military victory or driven out the political leaders to seize control of the government. Jesus and his disciples met people face to face and transformed their lives by removing the impediments that kept them from full inclusion and participation in their communities. Those saving activities that Jesus lists show up in various places in the prophets as signs that God is at work among the people. But conspicuously absent from Jesus' list here is one more sign that the prophets usually included: that captives are released and the oppressed are set free. Perhaps that was the work of the Messiah that John was waiting to experience first-hand, but we know the rest of John's story: eventually Herod has John beheaded. That John himself was not freed and that Jesus abbreviated the prophets' list reminds us that the working of God's will is unfinished business. We still have a long way to go.

Jesus changes the subject from what John expected of him to what the crowds expected of John: *What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? What did you go out to see?* He helps them to clarify what they may not have realized themselves: that they were looking for and longing for something unexpected, something different. Not a reed blowing in the wind, which would be usual and unremarkable in the wilderness. Not yet another leader in soft robes, who would lead them like every other soft-robed king in their royal palaces always had. John, with his camel hair clothes and strange food and spirited message evoked the prophets of old. The people went out to the wilderness to hear a prophet who would *not* tell them what everyone else told them, but would tell them what God had to say, a prophet who would call them *away* from what they expected of the world, to return to the life that God envisioned for them, to anticipate God coming to be among them in a new way. If their world was broken, and it was, they needed God to confound their expectations. If *our* world is broken, and it is, *we* need God to confound *our* expectations.

When we come here on Sunday morning to worship, when we come to the Table, when we come to the Word, what is it that we're coming to see? Are we not looking and longing for something other than what the world has taught us to expect? As we await Emmanuel, God who comes to be with us, may we be prepared to follow not where our own expectations would lead us but wherever God would have us go.