



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, December 12, 2010
The Third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete)

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock

on
Isaiah 35:1-10
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

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ARE YOU READY?

My son loves to hear our family stories surrounding his birth. How Aimee and I woke up in the middle of the night days before he was born too excited to sleep, so we went and ate pancakes at 3 in the morning; how his grandparents flew in from Georgia just to welcome him into the world, how I left him in the taxi when we brought him home from the hospital. And while that is all very fascinating for us, can you imagine what it must have been like for little Johnny Baptist, priest's kid, hearing about the events surrounding his birth.

Imagine him sitting at Elizabeth's knee listening to the story about the angel that showed up at dad's office to tell the old man his wife was going to have a baby. And how he shot his mouth off about her being TOO old and then couldn't speak for nine months. Oh, and you should have heard the things this angel said about John, how he was going to grow up to do great things for the nation. But poor John. As good as they said he was going to be, they always had to throw his cousin up in his face. "John, you're good all right, but Mary's boy, that kid might grow up to be Messiah some day."

Is it any wonder the boy grows up isolated, dresses funny and seems to have a problem with authority? And what's worse, as it often is with children that hold such promise; he winds up in jail. And that's where we find John the Baptist in our reading today. John has so aggravated Herod about the wife he had no business marrying, that the king locks him up.

But John didn't start in prison, all this began in the desert. Throughout the bible we find people spending time or wandering about in the desert. We don't have much use for it ourselves, but perhaps because we don't like the desert, God seems to find it all the more useful. It's a good place to be if you want to get your head on straight. There aren't many distractions and it has a way of focusing the mind on the essentials; just those things you need in order to live. We try to approximate that wilderness experience in Advent and Lent, two seasons of purging, simplicity, austerity. They exist to tightly focus us on those things we need to do in order to receive new life that is coming into our world.

And so it was for John; he needed time in the desert to prepare himself, so that he could take up his work to prepare the way. He might have needed the desert to help him sort out the stories and the expectations and his own hope. Before calling anyone to repentance he does

penance. And when John has properly discerned his vocation and is ready, he looks at us and asks, “Are you ready?”

You have to be very ready to receive what’s coming. You have to be watching for it, intent on not missing it, because it comes so quickly and quietly. And here I’m speaking of the nativity; God’s son slipping into this world in the quiet of the night, everything hushed. The savior of the world is here, joy is announced to a few choice souls and then the world grinds on, oblivious to the infant cries on the back street of a little town. So Jesus gets tucked away in another small village until one day many years later, seeing him approach, his cousin John turns to his companions and says, “This is the one I’ve been telling you about. This is the lamb of God. Yes, and more than a lamb, this is God’s own son.” It would have been so easy for John’s disciples to have missed Jesus, if it weren’t for their friend John who was ready, knew what he was looking for and could point and say, “There he is.”

And here we are all over again and in a few days we’re going to remember that quiet night in which a little baby slipped into our own small world to begin saving it. But the world grinds on now louder than ever and I wonder how any of us can get ready. Our pace is too fast, the din is too great. I could use a day or two in the desert.

But it’s not just the nativity I’m concerned about. I’m wondering about the judgment that is to come. John said that the axe is at the root of the tree and that the Lord has his winnowing fork in hand. We heard in the letter from James, “behold, the judge is standing at the doors.” What are we going to do about that? Or do you think we need to do anything at all about it? Do we even believe that’s true?

This is what our gospel today comes down to. There has been a lot of ink spilt about the doubts John must have been having when he was in prison. This is the man who grew up hearing family stories about his own birth and that of Jesus. The man who baptized Jesus, saw the Holy Spirit descend upon him and heard the voice declaring that he was God’s son. This is the man who sent his own disciples to follow Jesus and thought so highly of him that he felt unworthy to untie the strap of his sandal.

But now John finds himself in a hole. And maybe he’s subject to the same fantasies many people had about their Messiah, that he was going to be bold and strong and loud, but Jesus is moving too slowly and is far too quiet. So perhaps from his hole, not seeing quite as clearly as on the river bank, John begins to doubt. He sends some friends to Jesus and they ask, “Are you really who John thinks you are?”

In answer, Jesus doesn’t make any bold messianic claims, but quietly says, “Look at what’s happening. Look at what I’m doing, and if you have hopes for what I might be able to do for you, just look at what I am already doing for others.”

We’ll never know if that answer satisfied John, but we do know that John never stopped being the prophet that he was called to be, even unto death. And he did it all without ever witnessing the resurrection, a sign that certainly confirmed the faith of many thousands in the birthing of the church. It’s too easy to observe John’s existential moment and wonder what he was thinking or believing, or not believing in his last days. But what John was believing is only important to John. What *is* important is what are *you* believing? Do you believe that Jesus is the one? Or are you waiting on someone or something else? If you don’t believe, pray that the Lord might help your unbelief. But if you do believe, and I do, what do each of us have left to do to prepare ourselves for his coming? Both as the child savior and the mighty judge.