

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Advent 3, Series C  
Saturday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Sunday, December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Sermon: The Voice in Prison<sup>1</sup>  
Text: Luke 7:18-28

Focus: Christ will return one day to judge the nations and renew the world.  
Function: That they would wait for Christ's return with hope.  
Structure: Story-Framed  
Locus: "He will come again to judge the living and the dead" (2<sup>nd</sup> Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and  
Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. On November 21, 1943, Dietrich

Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend from Tegel prison in Berlin:

"Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent; one waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other—things that are really of no consequence—the door is shut, and can be opened only *from the outside*."<sup>2</sup>

Bonhoeffer was imprisoned for his involvement in a conspiracy to smuggle Jews out of Germany and a failed plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. A Lutheran pastor in the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer refused to take the oath of loyalty to Hitler, an oath that, tragically, many pastors did make. Bonhoeffer refused. His Christian faith kept him from

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reprise of a sermon preached on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 135.

pledging allegiance to a godless tyrant. That same Christian faith convinced him that Hitler was a monster either to be removed or destroyed. So Bonhoeffer became involved in the conspiracy and was imprisoned for living out his Christian convictions in the Kingdom of the Left Hand. Eventually, he would be hanged for his “crimes” against the Third Reich. I believe he died as a Christian martyr.

There is not much difference between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John the Baptist. In fact, there is not much difference between John the Baptist and every Christian who suffers for the name of Jesus and the sake of the cross.

When we meet John the Baptist in our Gospel reading today, he languishes in a prison cell. Dejected, lonely, and afraid, he sounds nothing like the voice crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord!” (Luke 3:4, ESV).<sup>3</sup> Now John’s voice echoes only among the walls of the prison. Although recognized as a bold prophet by the Jewish people, the Jewish authorities regarded the Baptizer as a loose cannon and a political instigator. According to the ancient Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

historian, Josephus, “King” Herod believed John’s eloquent preaching would lead to rebellion.<sup>4</sup> According to Luke, Herod threw John into prison because of his outspoken criticism that Herod stole his brother’s wife, as well as for the other “evil things that Herod had done” (Luke 3:19). Ultimately, John was in prison for preaching the inconvenient truth of God’s Word. It’s always dangerous to speak truth to power.

What led John to send messengers to Jesus, we do not know. It appears that either John or his disciples were discouraged by John’s imprisonment and disappointed by Jesus’ ministry. John the Baptist had preached fire and brimstone. He spoke of the coming Messiah as one who would bring upheaval to the world and cast judgment on unrepentant sinners and Israel’s enemies: the occupying Romans and corrupt priests. John expected the Messiah to show up with axe in hand—and to carry the torch of his fiery message. But Jesus’ torch didn’t burn very brightly.

But that’s not what Jesus did. Rather than raise an army, Jesus wandered the countryside *loving* people! Jesus preached, taught, and

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<sup>4</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* in *Josephus: The Essential Writings*, trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1988), 267.

healed people. He didn't raise a ruckus or usher in the kingdom of God in the way that John expected and hoped. The reports filtering back to John indicated that Jesus did not come as a conquering king but as a Messiah of mercy. Instead of fasting, Jesus went to parties with gluttons and drunks (Luke 7:33-34). That is not what John thought was supposed to happen.

Earlier, when John had told his disciples, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29), he believed that Jesus was the Messiah. When he said of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30), he thought things were about to change. But what reward did John get for preparing Jesus' way? Only chains and a prison cell—a true prophet's reward (Luke 13:34; cp. Jer. 37:15). Perhaps he began to doubt his earlier assertions about Jesus. So John sent his disciples to inquire, "*Are* you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Luke 7:19).

When John's disciples found Jesus, he was too busy for office hours or even a lunch meeting. So Jesus invited John's disciples to shadow him for the afternoon and try to keep up with his schedule. He

spent the day healing people with a touch and driving out demons with a word. Then he turned to them and said, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (Luke 7:22-23).

In other words: Open your eyes and look around! Wake up and smell the coffee! I’m making miracles happen! The blind see, the lame leap, the deaf hear, the dead live, and the poor have hope for the first time in their lives! The kingdom of God is at hand! The reign of God is breaking into the world! Can’t you see it? Can’t you feel it? God is here! I AM here. If this isn’t kingdom work, I don’t know what is!

Remember what Isaiah said:

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn” (Isa. 61:1-2; cp. Luke 4:16-21).

Dear friends, tell John *that* is what I’m doing. This is my ministry and call. The mission of the Messiah is a mission of *mercy*. John did his

job. He prepared my way. He told the people to repent. Now I call them by grace. I bring them healing and Good News. (That's my extrapolation of Jesus' reply to John).

We do not know what John's messengers said when they reported back to him at the jailhouse. Nor do we know if Jesus' words gave John encouragement. But I choose to believe that Jesus' Word did comfort him. For the Word of God is the greatest comfort to any true servant of the Lord. Now, as John the Baptist waited for the Advent of Jesus from his prison cell in Herod's fortress, he could face each day with hope. Even on the day of his execution, I am confident that, while John *did* lose his head, he never lost heart.

We Christians also wait for God to act. Bonhoeffer writes that "the Advent season is a season of waiting, but our whole life is an Advent season, that is, a season of waiting for the last Advent, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth."<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, we look around at the wickedness and violence in our world and wonder why God doesn't do something about it. Mass shootings, war, and abortion

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<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. Jana Riess, *God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 2.

are signs that the devil is alive and well. Christians around the world are arrested, tortured, and killed every day because of their faith in Christ. Like John the Baptist and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, believers still suffer much for the name of Jesus.

Even in America, where we enjoy tremendous religious liberty, we watch the waning influence of the Church in society and culture. We lament our children and grandchildren as they fall away from faith and the hearts of men grow cold. Increasingly, the government and the marketplace appear more openly hostile to the Church and the Gospel.

On a more personal level, we cry and pray with family and friends who lose their jobs, houses, schools, and hope. And we ourselves are often trapped by our own inner prisons of guilt, depression, and anxiety, chained by bitterness and fear.

We cannot understand why Judgment Day hasn't come. The world is a mess. Why doesn't God *fix* it? Why doesn't Jesus come back and *do something* about it? Why doesn't he put things to rights? Jesus insists he is coming soon (Rev. 22:20). So why hasn't he shown up? Why

doesn't he seem to answer our prayer and doubts? Is Jesus really the one who is to come, or should we look for someone else?

But then Jesus points us to his Word and works and says, "What have you seen and heard?" Those who were once spiritually blind now have the eyes of faith and are enlightened by the light of Christ. Those who were dead in their sins are now made alive by God's grace. Those who were stained with guilt have been washed clean in the blood of Jesus and the waters of Holy Baptism. Those who were deaf to God's voice have heard and believed the Gospel. Those who were dead in their trespasses are now alive in Christ. And those who were poor in spirit—depressed and oppressed by the ruin of the world—have heard the Good News of God's love and mercy in Jesus Christ. Do you not see that the reign of God has come among you? The kingdom of God is at hand! Do you not see Jesus bleeding and dying on the cross *for you*?

All our life is one of waiting for God to act, to judge the nations, to bring about the new creation, and to send back his Son. In Revelation, when the fifth seal is opened, John the Evangelist sees under the heavenly altar the souls of those slain for their testimony to Christ (Rev.

6:9). Like John the Baptist, they were killed for the sake of Jesus' Word and name. "They cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" (Rev. 6:10).

But the souls under the altar are not given a definitive answer, a timeline, or a date. Rather, they are simply given white robes—the robe of Christ's righteousness (Rev. 7:9-17)—and told to wait a little longer—"until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been" (Rev. 6:11). In other words, the answer to "How long?" is "Not yet!" Not enough Christians have been killed yet. We have not suffered quite enough. More martyrs must bear witness to the crucified and risen Lord Jesus before his return. "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14).

"How long, O Lord?" That is our question too. "How long, O Lord?" During Advent we admit there is much that is not right in the world. So, with the rest of creation, we groan inwardly, eagerly awaiting

Christ's return, when he will make all things new (Rom. 8:18ff). How long?

And during Advent we admit there is something not right with *ourselves*. So we wait for Christ to come again to restore God's image to us. "...When he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). The final fulfillment is yet to come. But in the meantime, do not lose hope. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9, NIV).

Yet even now the new creation breaks into our ruined world as Jesus gives sight to the blind, makes the deaf to hear and the lame to leap, raises the dead, and preaches Good News to the poor in spirit—those like us who are lost in the poverty of their sins. He comes to break our chains, forgive our sins, and set the captives free (Luke 4). Alleluia! Come, Lord Jesus! By your grace make us ready for your coming. In the name of Jesus, our coming King. Amen.