

Sermon for 12 December 2010  
3 Advent, Year A

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.  
Amen.

"Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" It's an odd question for John the Baptist to ask, considering that he got his answer eight chapters earlier. At the Jordan River the heavens had opened and the voice of God Himself confirmed Jesus' identity: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." John knew that he was unworthy to Baptize the Lord to whom he had been pointing, and had consented only because of the authority of him who demanded it. So, John the Baptist had seemed to figure out that it was Jesus himself for whom he was the forerunner, so why this question about Jesus' role in the story so much later? If in the third chapter of Matthew, John seems convinced that Jesus is none other than the

Messiah, why would he begin to question this by the eleventh chapter?

It seems to me that the question on John's lips might not be as strange as it first seems, and this is because of the shape which his expectations must have taken. John's understanding of the Messiah's mission would likely have been the same as his contemporaries'- namely that the Messiah would come and free God's people, the Jews, from the captivity of an oppressive foreign regime. And now John finds himself quite literally a captive, a prisoner, after the one whom he believed to be the Messiah had already come. Things were supposed to get much better with the advent of the Messiah, but for John and for the others who followed him, things had got much, much worse. We can imagine the tone with which John's question was asked. He must have been more than a little frustrated. "Are you the Messiah or not?!"

Now two-thousand years later, we know how this ended. The Kingdom which Christ had ushered in was not of the sort expected. It was not a free Israel, with a reëstablished monarchy, a renewed corporate worship life centered at the temple, and a Roman Army on the run. For as long as the Jews had Jewish leaders they would remain Roman puppets, the temple would be utterly destroyed a few decades later, and the Roman Army wouldn't go anywhere for a very long time. We know that the Kingdom Christ would establish was different from the Kingdom his contemporary compatriots expected- that it would be a Kingdom not of this world, a Kingdom whose citizens were determined not by lineage but by Baptism, whose King could not be seen in some court in Jerusalem, but in his marvelous, miraculous appearing wherever Christians are gathered together around his throne, which is the altar. We know that now, but would we have expected it if we were John the Baptist or some other first century Jew who'd

been thrown in prison for disturbing the peace? Not likely.

So, in a sense, John's apparent lack of faith is understandable. If somebody told us he were here to free us from oppression and we ended up in prison instead, we'd naturally wonder if the man who made that promise really intended to be our Saviour after all. We, like John, might become exasperated and ask, "Well, are you, or aren't you?"

That we would probably be in the same boat as John means that the message we get from his qualms is not that we're a whole lot smarter or more faithful than those first century Jews whose expectations were misdirected. If anything, I think it should simultaneously convict us of our own misdirected expectations and serve as a consolation for the same. If a great hero of the faith like John the Baptist could get snippy with Jesus when things didn't seem to go according to his plan,

then maybe we're not so bad after all. On the other hand, we should be even more reticent to expect God to conform to our expectations, knowing how easy it is to fall into that trap.

Ultimately, Advent is about deferred expectations, the hope of something we don't fully understand at a time which we do not choose. Just like John might have expected political salvation in his own lifetime rather than spiritual salvation delayed, so have the hopes of the Church often been misplaced. I've mentioned before in sermons and classes the great heresy of progress that took hold of protestant theology in the nineteenth century: the idea that we were marching slowly but surely toward building the Kingdom of God here on earth ourselves, rather than waiting eagerly for Christ's radical transformation of our existence at the end of time. That idea of human progress is still very much alive and well in some corners of the Church, but it is another example of assuming that our

plans are coterminous with God's. Just as insidious is the popular idea that a Christian will, in this life, be spared from trials and tribulations if only his faith is strong enough. This outlook is just as full of pride as is faith in human progress, and just as much divorced from a healthy suspension of our demands in light of God's plan.

Advent is at least in part about this process of setting aside our own expectations of how God ought to operate and subjugating those expectations to the promise of Christ's reign as it is now and as it will be in the age to come. It is about waiting for those four last things that we used to talk about a lot in the old days—death, judgment, heaven and hell—knowing that for those who are faithful, God's plan in His time will be more glorious than anything we could possibly expect.

So, when we ask, along with John the Baptist, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" We may be sure that the answer is "yes"

even if our doubt militates against our reasons to believe. Our doubt is natural, but it will be answered to our satisfaction and be more satisfying than we, in our impatience, can foresee.

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Amen.