

2 When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples **3** to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

4 Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: **5** The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. **6** Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

7 As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? **8** If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. **9** Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. **10** This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Multiple Choices?

This last week – we had the privilege of registering our vehicles and changing our driver’s license to the state of California. But California doesn’t allow just anyone to drive on their roads. There is a test full of multiple choice questions. I’ve always had a problem with multiple guess or choice questions ever since a ruthless high school teacher made them more difficult. The solution could be a,b,c,d,e,f or any combination of the above. There were multiple right answers and in order to get full credit you had to mark them all and even then there was just enough truth to some answers which made you wonder if the answer really was always “C”. I’d guess, second guess, and guess again.

Those tests caused me to question every single multiple choice test I’ve taken since, including my driver’s test where after multiple second guesses the machine would let me know which answer was right or wrong.

I wonder if John struggled with the options before him? The numbers aren’t adding up. As he sits in prison before the DMV’s kiosk pondering the

choices he's made in life. He looks back at his answers and can't see where he has gone wrong. Finally, he sends disciples back to the teacher to ask about what appears to be a failing grade, "Are you the one to come or should I expect another?"

We too do the same thing. When the unexpected happens, when we struggle and suffer while the world around us seems to benefit, we too may question, "Where did I go wrong? What did I do?" Jesus responds in the same way, "Go back to the Word. There are no other options, be patient and trust in me."

And John did. He firmly proclaimed God's Words to the Pharisees and Sadducees. Remember his words from last week, with confidence he called out, "*Who warned you? You brood of Vipers.*" *The ax is already at the root of the tree. He will come. His winnowing fork is in hand to clear the threshing floor.* John preached repentance, forgiveness of sins, and the coming kingdom of God. Then we arrive at Chapter 11 and popularity has changed to opposition and John is in prison because in his confidence he selected all the right answers even when standing before Herod Antipas and calling him to repentance, "You shouldn't be sleeping with your brother's wife."

The results. Herodias wants his head. John sits in prison and he begins to question his confidence, his mission, his identity. He second guesses himself and sends disciples back to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one or is there someone else we should wait for?" John hasn't done anything wrong instead he suffers for the right answer. So where is that ax? Where is the justice? In other words, "Jesus, why are you out there doing miracles for everyone else but nothing for me?"

John knew who Jesus was. He heard the voice from heaven called out, "*This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*" (Matthew 3:17). He saw the dove descend. John had to be absolutely certain in order to tell his disciples, "Look the Lamb of God... follow him." And now he second guesses his answers and maybe even is trying to prod Jesus to come and help. He directs his doubts to the one who could answer. Jesus answer is, "Wait."

We too can stand firmly on the Word of God, with full confidence in what we believe, only to suffer for it. Being faithful often has unexpected consequences. What one might expect is that faithful work would be rewarded, God will bless us with health and a life of comfort but we too may be imprisoned. We too may hear the doctors word, "cancer" and wrestles with

the choices we've made in life. During these tests we too may second guess your choices in life.

That's when we look to the evidence around us. We look for some tangible evidence that all is not as it appears. Sometimes we see God's work and his hand in our lives but at other times he is silent. We sit in the prison of our bodies surrounded by death and the curse of sin, and those walls close in on us. And despite all of the evidence to the contrary we too may doubt. John heard the voice from heaven. He saw the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus. We too have heard God's voice in his word. We too have had the Holy Spirit poured out on us in baptism and yet we too like John can doubt.

The Christian life is not one test we pass after another. We fail. The comfort I find in John's question is that if it happened to him, it can happen to me. *None of us is perfect.* We don't always rejoice in suffering. Instead we find every reason to complain and criticize God's plan just like we do the DMV. How does God handle it?

Jesus doesn't criticize John. He doesn't send him a cake with the message, "You're dead to us." He forgives his doubts and even has a word of encouragement for him. He points him back to the prophets. Jesus quotes from Isaiah 35, and 61. All of these miracles are being performed, *"Report what you hear and see, the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."* Jesus wants John to know who he is and what he is doing. Jesus understands why he has doubts. And while John may be hoping to hear more about freedom for the captives that's the one thing Jesus doesn't mention. Instead his message is one of, "Yes, this is who I am. Deliverance is coming, but wait."

Jesus then defends John before those who came out to see him. No, John is not a wishy washy character blown around by any wave of teaching. He is not some finely pampered king in a palace. He's in prison. He is a prophet. John was more than a prophet he was the greatest prophet, the forerunner to the Christ. It's almost as if John is paving the exact road that Jesus will take to the cross in just three years time. When Jesus is falsely imprisoned and unjustly crucified but with one difference - there was never any doubt in his mind.

Jesus knew who he was. He responds with the words of Malachi 3:1 *"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare a way before you."* And he changes the pronouns to refer to the people hearing him. If John is the

prophet then Jesus is the LORD standing before them. Jesus is the LORD - the God of Israel who has come into this world. He has come to bring healing not just for the body but also for the soul. He has come to deal with the reality of this broken world by taking the curse of doubt.

God doesn't condemn you either when you question. He wants you to direct your questions to him. He points you back to his word. He still speaks to us in his word and wants us to receive strength when we doubt. There in his word you will find the fulfillment of the prophecy. There, God has told us that in this life we will have trouble.

No he does not eliminate all our troubles but he does come among us and he walks with us through every one. This is Emmanuel, God with us. He holds us when the world falls apart. He enters our suffering and reminds us you are not alone and even when those walls of death collapse in us he brings us through life and death. He not only understands our pain but he is with us in them. He pronounces us "*Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.*" That's salvation language. It doesn't mean you will enjoy a long happy life on earth. God's never promised us that. But he has promised that he will be with us through thick or thin.

It doesn't matter how dire the circumstances, your Savior will not walk away from you. He will not second guess his choice in choosing you. You will not have to deal with your sinful condition yourself. Don't second guess God's love just because life isn't going as anticipated. You wonder, "If he is willing to die for me to save me eternally, why doesn't he rescue me from my current hell?" You may wonder when God will come but he has not told us. What has told us is to wait. We wait this 3rd Sunday of Advent and we stand with all Christians of all time waiting between the his first advent in humility and his second advent in glory when he will heal all hurt, bring justice to this world, and wipe every tear from the eye.

Until then we wait, register our vehicles, take driver's tests, and discover that California does allow just about anyone to drive on their roads. With the number of wrong answers I on the multiple guess test I was sure I had failed only to be met with a congratulations you've passed. Christianity is the same way: we get the answer wrong we make poor decisions on regular basis but because of Jesus - who came for the impatient, doubtful, second guessers like you and me we receive the same message: Congratulations: You're forgiven. Amen.