

Advent 2020: “A Cry of Faith”

6 December 2020 - Led by David Boyd

Welcome

Advent Candle Lighting: Stephen & Angelina Cowan

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 328 O Come, All Ye Faithful

Prayers of Adoration & Confession: Winnie Wilmot

Reading: Matthew 11:2-15

Reflection: *O Come, Lord of Might*

Sermon:

*O come, O come, Thou Lord of Might, who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times didst give the Law in cloud and majesty and awe.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

That's our verse for today from “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Now, you could be forgiven for wondering what on earth has the giving of the Law at Sinai got to do with Advent and Christmas? Then, on top of that, Stephen and Angelina lit the Faith candle for us today so our theme is the Cry of Faith, which wouldn't seem to sit too well with the giving of the Law either. We have all sat through sermons that demonstrated that faith is the opposite to a works-based righteousness. So, what is going to tie all of this together?

The answer lies in our reading for today - John the Baptist! John was the last of the Old Testament prophets. Like the prophets before him, he called the people to repentance, to turn from their sin and be baptised in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. He was calling them back to obedience to the Law that God gave them at Sinai that today's verse of our Advent song celebrates. John is God's official Advent spokesman.

As for faith, I want to look at faith through the lens of doubt, because it is obvious from our reading that the official Advent spokesman is going through something of a crisis of faith here. He sends his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” Verse 2 tells us that John poses this question in response to what he heard Christ was doing, so clearly Jesus was not behaving in the way that John expected a Messiah to act.

Now, it might seem strange to look at faith with doubt in mind, but I think that Advent is for doubters, which means it is for *all* of us. There is not one among us with perfect faith. That's because life is never plain sailing; there are natural ups and downs. Sometimes, the path of faith is smooth; at other times, we find that it's rough and we have wandered far off course.

In the run-up to Christmas, some of us can feel the so-called “Christmas spirit,” and the world seems magical, generous, and full of kindness. But then Christmas can be excruciating for others who have lost loved ones, who are alone, whose health is fragile, who face financial stresses and struggles, or who have to deal with family conflicts and concerns, which drain them of any sense of comfort and joy. Such things can cause us to doubt God and His love for us.

So, before we judge John too harshly, we need to remember that things weren't looking too good for him at this point in his life. He was banged up in prison because he had rebuked King Herod to his face. Certainly not the actions of a man who was lacking in faith. And yet we find him now, going through his own dark night of the soul, wracked with doubt and seeking reassurance from Jesus.

If you can remember back to the last time I preached, the passage was the story of the healing of ten lepers from Luke's gospel. In that sermon I referred to this incident that we have read about today. I used it to demonstrate that the nine Jewish lepers should have recognized Jesus, because Jesus tells John's disciples to go back to John and tell him of all that they had seen and heard. Clearly, the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking and the leper cured were all seen as things that the Messiah would do, and were therefore proof of Jesus' identity as Messiah.

Some stories just stay with you and when I was trying to figure out how to tie the different aspects of today's service together, my mind went back to this story. This story stayed with me, because it's a story of doubt. And that doubt is all the more striking because the doubter is one of the most powerful people of faith the world has ever known: John the Baptist.

Today, we see him sitting in prison doubting Jesus, doubting his faith, doubting his calling, wondering if he will ever feel that sense of strength and conviction that once marked everything he said and did. There he is, sitting in the darkness with his doubts, hearing these reports of what Jesus is doing, and it just doesn't make sense to him. So, he sends messengers to Jesus, asking, "Are you *really* the One?" This is the same man who baptized Jesus, who saw the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descending upon him in the form of a dove, who heard the voice of God thundering, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." But now, he is filled with doubt — "Are you really the One?"

Did I get it wrong? he's asking. *Have all those sermons and baptisms been for nothing? Has my faith led me to a dead end? Has the work I've done for God's kingdom yielded no results? Has this whole Jesus thing meant nothing?* Does that say something to you? It surely does to me. If John the Baptist can be wracked with doubt, then I shouldn't be too surprised that sometimes it will happen to me too.

If I can get you to think back to that sermon on the ten lepers again, you might remember that I talked about our need to feel that we are in control of our lives. That obsession with control leads us to come up with a way of thinking about God that explains exactly what God is up to and how God proposes to go about it. Until we have him all figured out, it is very hard for us to trust God. And I suggested that perhaps that's because what we really want is to trust our theology, rather than God, which is to say we want to trust *ourselves* rather than God. We want God proved to us. We want to be safe and in control. Remember all that?

The problem for us comes when God starts acting in ways that we hadn't anticipated. It seems that even John the Baptist was not immune to that. He had a mental picture of what the Messiah was going to do and how he was going to do it. Then, while he is sitting in the dark in prison, he hears what Christ is doing and it just doesn't jibe with the picture that he had in his head and doubt creeps in. "Are you really the One?" Can't you hear the bafflement in his voice!

As Christians, we tend to think that our faith should be rock-solid, there should be no room for doubt. We think this means that we will not, cannot, and must not ever have thoughts like John had about Jesus. Nevertheless, who among us has never thought:

- Does God really exist?
- Is what I believe the right way?
- Why am I here? Is there really purpose and meaning in life?
- If God is here, why does He feel so far away?
- Why aren't my prayers answered?
- Why does life seem so unfair?
- Why is there so much suffering?
- Is there really an afterlife?

We do have those thoughts sometimes, don't we? *Don't we?* Maybe not on our good days, but on the days when the weight of the world is on our shoulders, it can be a different story. We think that having faith means never thinking those kinds of thoughts, but I can tell you right now, that just isn't so. We tend to think that having "faith" means we wrap our minds around a list of truths and stick to them, and that the goal from that point on is to become so certain about them that we'll never doubt them again. That seems to be the general idea in reciting the Apostle's Creed, for example.

Though having right beliefs is important, faith is not simply about always having certainty in a list of truths. No! Faith is about trusting a Person, even when, in our weakness, we doubt the certainty of the truths we confess. You see, it's easy to fall into the trap of putting our faith in our own thoughts about God, rather than really trusting God Himself. Let me repeat that. *It's easy to fall into the trap of putting our faith in our own thoughts about God, rather than really trusting God Himself.* We're very fond of quoting Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." There is real wisdom, and yet, I can tell you right now, that most of the time we do the opposite. We lean on our own understanding and trust not in the Lord.

I can tell you from my own life and from observing others that there are times when we all have more questions than answers. There are times when we really don't understand what God is doing. When that happens, we won't always feel sure about the tenets of our faith. Our neat little systems of thinking and behaving will get upset, with pieces of them rolling all over the floor. The expectations we have about how God will or should act will get shattered. We will find ourselves in a dark place where it feels like we've got it all wrong. *"Jesus, are you really the One?"*

That's where John the Baptist found himself. After all his powerful preaching. After all his sacrifice and devotion. After persuading so many people to welcome the coming Messiah. After baptizing Jesus Himself and seeing the Father send Him out to announce the arrival of the Kingdom of God in this world. There he was, after all that, wallowing in a pit of doubt and despair.

But I want you to note something in our text — Jesus doesn't give out to John for having those doubts. No! He does the complete opposite. He sends John's friends back to comfort him, and encourage him and give him the news that a lot of good things are happening, and that Jesus is still there, going strong, bringing God's promises to pass. Jesus also strongly affirmed John himself and encouraged others not to think badly of him simply because he

was going through a rough patch in his faith. When Jesus heard about John's doubts, He didn't turn His back on him. He encouraged him. He affirmed him. He basically gave him a big hug!

So, I want to say to you this morning, if you are finding things tough going at the moment; if all is not well in your world and it's causing you to doubt and wonder where God is in all of this, that's OK! *That's OK!* It's a hard place to be, and it's especially hard during this Advent/Christmas season, when everyone is singing songs of comfort and joy while you are sitting there feeling miserable in your doubts, wondering where all the comfort and joy is for *you*. So, I want to say to you, don't beat yourself up about it. If you're there, remember John the Baptist this Christmas. It can happen to the best of us; in fact, it happens to all of us, at one time or another.

Our theme through this whole series is this song, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Emmanuel means "God with us", and I believe that's exactly why Jesus came — **to be with us in both the darkness and the light**. And that's also why we're here as a church — to be there for each other, even when our doubts and difficulties imprison us. To rejoice with those who rejoice, and to weep with those who weep.

May God help us to trust in Him, even when we find it hard to believe.

Song of Reflection: Who Am I?

Prayers for Others: Anne Gillanders

Closing Hymn: IPH 299 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Announcements

Benediction: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.

Discussion & Application:

This verse of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" refers to Jesus as *Lord of Might* (the LORD Almighty). How can this aspect of Jesus' character encourage in times of doubt and despair?

"It's easy to fall into the trap of putting our faith in our own thoughts about God, rather than really trusting God Himself." Identify one area of your life where you are putting trust in your own understanding. Cry out to God in repentance, ask Him to teach you His ways, that you may depend on Him and walk in His paths (Isaiah 2:3), and listen expectantly for His encouragement.

"We're here as a church to be there for each other, even when our doubts and difficulties imprison us." Even though we face many restrictions, there are still ways we can support one another as we travel the road of faith together, side by side. How can you "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" in this season?