

Gaudete

13 December, Anno Domini 2020

St. Matthew 11:2-11

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In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our sinful flesh is prone to sensationalize men like John the Baptist. They can seem so strong, so faithful, so unwavering in their devotion. That they can become caricatures in our minds, mythological and therefore unreal. Or we are tempted to think of them almost as demi-gods, not like the rest of us and therefore worthy on some level of our devotion and prayers. And in John the Baptist's case, even Jesus says that among those born of women there are none who are greater than John. That's probably why there is such a debate about what happens in our reading today. "Does John send his disciples to ask for their benefit or for his own?" Many find it appalling to imagine that the same fire-brand who saw the dove and heard the voice from heaven, the same man who on two different occasions recorded in the evangelist John's Gospel literally pointed his finger at Jesus and said "Behold the Lamb of God!" could possibly now be asking a question like "Are you the Christ or should we look for another?"

But why should we expect of John, a man born of sinful flesh and blood just like our own, things that we don't expect of ourselves? Have you ever been essentially branded a heretic by the very people who were experts in the Scriptures and served in God's temple? Have you ever been thrown into prison knowing that you would most likely be executed for calling the pagan ruler to repentance for his adultery? Is your faith in Christ so stalwart that such trials would not shake you and make you doubt if maybe you were the one who was wrong? I think it's quite cruel to the Baptizer to expect him to be different than the rest of us sinners. Did he not say to Jesus "I need to be baptized by you"?

John was met with fierce opposition from all sides. The Pharisees and Saducees refused his baptism (and thus refused his preaching and the Christ he proclaimed). Herod imprisoned him. And even Jesus Himself didn't exactly seem to line up with what John had been preaching. Is it really any surprise to anyone that faithful John suffered doubt? Does it detract from his faithfulness? Does it call his entire ministry into question? Absolutely not! It confirms it. What's more, his response to those doubts is exactly what makes him a great example of faith. He did what a Christian does - he sought Jesus. He wanted Jesus' reassurance of that which he

believed. That is the whole action of faith - seeking out the consolation and peace which only Christ can provide.

No one can survive the constant temptations and worldly pressures without constantly hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd. No one. Not John the Baptist. Not Abraham. Not Elijah. Not you. Not me. None of the saints are capable of any faith from their own strength. Just as surely as you and I can't by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or come to him, neither could the heroes of the faith. They bore the same flesh. They were tempted in the same way. They fell. They doubted. They failed to believe. This is why the modern worship of faith is so bad. The faith of sinners is weak and shifting. Though John the Baptist was no reed shaken by the wind, he was a sinner and sinners are filled with doubts and fears. No sinner is exempt.

But neither does doubt mean you're not a Christian. That is comfort for Christians living on this side of glory. Faith and doubt dwell together. They wrestle constantly against one another in the same heart. We know Jesus has forgiven us but Satan asks "Did Jesus really say?" and so we need to hear it again....and again....and again. We know that we are God's children, but we ran our heavenly Father's holy Name through the mud again and we need to be reassured that our Father hasn't cast us out as we deserve. We suffer persecution and torment and we want to know that Jesus isn't offended by our weakness like the world is. That is life under the cross. That is life in this valley of sorrow.

It is of the utmost importance that we see that Jesus didn't chastise John for seeking assurance. He gladly granted John's request by sending him preachers to testify to the words and works of Jesus - the blind receiving their sight, the lame being made to walk, lepers cleansed, the deaf being made to hear, the dead raised, and the poor having good news preached to them. This is what the prophet Isaiah said the Messiah would do. Through those whom He sent to John Jesus said "Yes, John. I am the Christ. Though you shall meet an inglorious end in the eyes of the world, you are the forerunner. I am exactly who you proclaimed me to be. I am the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. I have taken away your sin. Well done, good and faithful servant. Come and inherit the kingdom prepared for you by my Father. Take heart. You are beloved of God, though the world rejects you and curses you and kills you. You are the victor because I have overcome them all for you." Jesus does the very same thing for you today. You seek His reassurance in your struggle and He sends you pastors and says that in them you hear Him.

John would have also known what Isaiah before the words that Jesus quoted. The prophet said “Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.’” That is exactly what a wearied and battered soul like John’s needed to hear. Faith is absolutely NOT the absence of the need for Jesus. The stronger the faith, the more fervent the desire for Jesus’ consolation and reassurance, the greater the desire to hear what Jesus speaks and having heard Jesus speak to do as He bids take and eat His Body and Blood as the most concrete assurance of our salvation. Again, the goal of faith is not to NOT need Jesus. The goal of faith is to be as close to Jesus at all times as possible. You must decrease. Your glory must decrease. Christ and His glory must increase in your heart and mind.

John’s preaching was spot on. He had been faithful. He had pointed to the right Messiah. But faithful preaching doesn’t meet with the success the world and our flesh expect and want. It is resisted and dismissed, even within the Church. It is surrounded by weakness and brokenness. The Gospel itself is one of humility. It isn’t a Gospel that speaks highly of man. It is a Gospel that gives all glory to God. It is scandalous because Jesus is scandalous. The Gospel does not praise you nor does it insist that you be praiseworthy. The Gospel lays all of your good works and all of your wisdom on the dung hill. The Gospel calls you to lay all your hope and trust in a man who was born in a cattle stall, who ate with sinners and tax collectors, and who died the inglorious death of crucifixion. The Gospel calls you to believe that Baptism now saves you, that your pastor’s forgiveness is the forgiveness of God, and that under common bread and wine lie hidden the Body and Blood of God for your salvation. It is a scandalous faith to those who trust in themselves. But it is the only and saving Gospel nonetheless.

And like John, even the most faithful among us, the so-called strongest Christians still need Christ, they still need to have their eyes drawn time and again to the fullness of Jesus’ work. That’s the irony. The strongest faith is the one that knows how weak and frail it is. The most faithful don’t seek less from Jesus. They seek more. They can’t get enough of Jesus’ comfort and assurance. Their heart leaps when they hear God say “Comfort, comfort my people.” “Yes, Lord. Comfort me. I am bruised and battered and frail and tired. Nothing around me makes sense. My faith is a wreck. My enemies surround me and they are too strong for me. My heart and mind are filled with sinful thoughts. Comfort me. Pour out your mercy to me in a never ending stream. I will open my mouth wide so that You may fill it with the good things of salvation.”

Our sinful flesh is perpetually messing things up, confusing the truth of God's Word with the poisoned lies of Satan. This is why God continues to speak and why it is imperative that we continually listen. Our sin-darkened minds are easily led astray into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. All too easily, when Christ's saving Word is absent, we begin to imagine things like "I don't really need forgiveness. I haven't been that bad lately." Or, "The Lord's Supper isn't really all that important. I can do without it. It won't hurt me." Or "I learned all that stuff in Sunday School and Confirmation class. I don't need to keep studying God's Word." Or "I am simply too sinful for God to forgive me." You need to hear God's Word. That is why God gave the Third Commandment, to force you to set aside time to hear His Word and receive the salvation and life and forgiveness that you need. If you didn't absolutely need what God gives, then He wouldn't have given or commanded it. God takes away sin and gives life by speaking and you are saved by hearing what He speaks. There is no other way. You need to hear Jesus. You need to eat His Body and Blood. He gives them and directs you to them because you need them. They save you. They comfort you.

Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! Look at what He does - He heals, He gives life, He sets free, He proclaims good news. He did not and does not come to destroy you but to save you. He has come here this day to rescue you. And your Lord pours out that Good News to you in a never-ending flood. As often as you hear His Word, as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, as often as you recall your Baptism, as often as you hear the absolution, You hear the Lord speak. And what He speaks is life. His speaking is the cause of our comfort and hope in this world no matter what the affliction may be. It was true of Abraham, Jacob, Ruth, Job, David, Mary, John, Peter. They all were comforted and sustained by the promises God spoke to them.

Dear Christian, don't be led astray into the false teaching that good Christians don't suffer doubt and don't need reassurance from Christ. That's a demonic lie sent by Satan to keep you from Christ. Like your Lord, you will suffer in this world for your faith. You will suffer persecution. You may be imprisoned like John. God forbid, but some of you may even suffer martyrdom for the sake of Christ. You will suffer doubt and fear. You will suffer temptation. You need Christ. You need His Word. God speaks in order that you may have peace and hope, in order that you may know the truth and not be deceived by the lies and deceptions of the devil, the world, and your own flesh, in order that you may live. Take up that Word. Hear it at every opportunity. Make opportunity every day to listen to your God who speaks to you. Make sure that everyone in your household

hears the comfort of the Gospel every day. Seek Christ's comfort and assurance that you may be comforted and have hope in the midst of all your sorrows.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.