

Introduction

Opening Comments:

A prayer from asanctifiedart.org:

Courageous God,

you invite us to live into our call.

You invite us to act, to serve, and to trust.

Instead of responding with a resounding “yes,”

we often hide our face.

We dig our heels in.

We look for someone else to volunteer.

Spark courage in us.

Remind us that every person is capable of making a difference.

Remind us that even when we’re scared, we are not alone.

You invite us forward.

With baby steps we hope,

we pray,

amen.

Announcements:

December 14, 2025

Are you the one?

That question bubbled up in the mind of the Prophet sitting in the corner of a dark, dank jail cell, head bowed, eyes closed, arms outstretched, chained to the wall behind him; his shoulders and back bore the marks of the whip, his face and ribs bore the marks of the jailer's fist – all part and parcel of the almost daily **physical torture** that was the lot of the imprisoned – the incarcerated had no rights – no advocacy groups. The Prophet's muscles burned and cramped from sitting or standing hour upon hour chained; he didn't sleep much – this place was crowded, filled with the stench of human waste, sweat, and blood ... filled with the screams and curses of fellow tortured inmates; it was also difficult to tell the time of day in this windowless, underground hellhole; he didn't eat much (of course, he rarely ate more than locusts and honey on the outside, but still ...) – there was no cafeteria or canteen ... you ate what your relatives and friends could bring to you – all part and parcel of the daily **psychological torture** meant to break you, to rob you of your humanity and dignity. The Romans were good at a lot of things – building roads, delivering clean water to dry places via the engineering marvel known as the aqueduct ... oh, and cruel humiliation of their enemies – stand against the Empire or its lackeys and you would be ground down to dust. The Romans were death merchants, and their jails were not meant for long-term stays – they held criminals in hideous conditions until they could be tried and either executed or exiled. The Prophet's crime? He dared to call out Herod Antipas, King of the Jews, for stealing his brother Philip's wife, Herodias ... Herod couldn't have that, couldn't have some crazy desert preacher questioning his morals and authority ... so he had the Prophet arrested and thrown in jail until he could figure out what to do with him. The Prophet, you see, was very popular with the common folk, and Herod didn't want a riot or rebellion on his

hands. So, this was where the Prophet, known to his disciples as John the Baptizer, found himself – sitting in the foul, filthy, loathsome darkness, waiting, and thinking about the one he once proclaimed to be the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world and the Chosen One (John 1:29-34). Now he wondered, whispered to the cold, damp stones of his cell, *Are you the one?*

The John of Matthew 3 makes a lot more sense in our Advent celebration than the John of Matthew 11. The John we read about last week was the fiery, bold *voice of one crying in the wilderness prepar[ing] the way of the Lord*. That John was certain that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand ... certain that the judgment of Israel's enemies, the end of oppression and the rule of evil empires, the end of exile was soon to follow ... certain that his distant cousin Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah who would bring all this to pass. Because of this, the John of Matthew 3 wasn't afraid to call for the people to Repent! ... wasn't afraid to call Temple leaders children of snakes ... wasn't afraid to call out the Roman puppet king Herod. Why should he be afraid – the Messiah was here – the world was about to change! Indeed, the world does change, but not in the way John expected.

Instead of riding ahead of the Messiah and his armies on a white horse proclaiming the new world order, John found himself imprisoned by the same old world order. Even worse, as his disciples visited John in jail and brought him food, they also brought him disquieting, disturbing news of what Jesus was doing in Galilee – and it didn't meet John's Messianic expectations. John expected winnowing and chopping on a national scale; instead, Jesus was healing, cleansing, and raising people from the dead in ones and twos in small villages. John expected Jesus to gather a mighty army (likely supplemented by supernatural heavenly forces!); instead, Jesus was hanging out with fishermen, tax collectors, and sinners. While Jesus had taken up John's slogan of "Repent,

for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near (Mt4:17)," John had also heard about Jesus' so-called Sermon on the Mount where he had taught the common people about the blessings of being meek, merciful peacemakers. I imagine the final straw that causes John to question Jesus is what happened in Capernaum in Mt 8 ... Jesus had healed the servant of ... wait for it ... a hated Roman centurion. Even further, Jesus had commended the centurion, saying *truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith!* "What is going on?" John wondered, "Did I have it all wrong? Are you the one? Because you certainly aren't acting like it!" John the proclaimer had become John the disappointed.

John's question to Jesus – *Are you the one or not?* – was based firmly in John's belief of what the Messiah **should** be doing – bringing about the judgment of God, overthrowing the cruel oppressors, ending Israel's long exile and bringing justice. Jesus, from what John hears, is more interested in showing God's love and mercy in his words and deeds. Jesus himself confirms it with his answer back to John: *Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them.* Jesus answered the Prophet with the prophets – Jesus was doing exactly what the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah said he would do. Instead of reassuring John that his expectations of the Kingdom of Heaven would be met soon ... instead of reassuring John that he would be released from jail soon ... Jesus gives John his own beatitude: *blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.* Jesus wants John to recognize that way he is breaking in the kingdom is the ONLY way no matter how upside down and unexpected it is. Cold comfort to the one still in jail. I wonder how John reacted ... we aren't told.

In our corner of this often dark, often dank world 2025, John's despair and disappointment resonates, his question of Jesus – *are you the one? If so, what*

are you doing? – easily translates to our time and can easily become our question. Our lives and those around us bear the marks of sickness, injustice, and oppression ... way too many are imprisoned and tortured by addiction, betrayal, and sin. We know the end of the story – and advantage we have over John, who waits in prison until he is beheaded in Matthew 14 as the party favor of a spoiled princess. He never sees the promised end he announced in Matthew 3. Jesus continues to play out his role as the long-awaited, unexpected Messiah ... continues teaching and healing and showing God's mercy and love until he follows John with his own arrest, torture, death, and resurrection. In upside-down fashion, Jesus does indeed conquer sin and death and principalities and powers. When we gather here every Sunday, we say the prayers, recite the creeds, and sing the songs that serve notice of our assent, our firm belief in these things ... and yet ... as people living between the two Advents, as people expectantly watching and waiting for the final consummation of the Kingdom of Heaven ... it is quick move to doubt and discouragement – *Are you the one? If so, what on earth are you doing?*

I wish I could say something this morning, this third Sunday of Advent, that would magically and permanently dispel all such questioning. Alas, I cannot. As I studied and reflected and prepared this homily, my mind kept returning to one thing, though, that may help ... I kept thinking about the symbol of the season at the front of our church – the Advent Wreath. Every week, we light a candle to remind ourselves that as children of God, we have Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love through Jesus. They are small candles – place them out on the dark street corners and alleyways of this sin-bent and broken world, and they don't illuminate much. They are also easily snuffed out – I think it is symbolic how we have to light and relight them week in and week out. But they are a powerful reminder, a powerful symbol of who we are and what we must do – in the good

times and bad, in the times when our faith overflows and runs dry. We are the light of the Kingdom of Heaven here in Springfield and we must keep those candles lit no matter what. Jesus IS on the move in this world, rescuing and redeeming his creation through us, with us, around us. In that we must not lose hope ... in the ways he is doing that we must not take offense. We have to keep the candles lit, keep being beacons of the Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love we commemorate during this season. We must keep lighting the candles even after this wreath is packed up and put away until the next year. I know – it's easier said than done ... I know – it doesn't seem very profound ... but THAT is our calling ... THAT is part and parcel of how we encourage one another around here to continue to be the waiting, watching, working people of God. May God grant us the strength of character and faith to be the beacons of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love we were meant to be. Amen.