



The Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:4-9; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Buyer's remorse: it's a universal experience.

In a couple of weeks many of us will find that out firsthand by finding ourselves in lengthy return lines. This year Black Friday fell exactly 29 days before Christmas, and so the typical 30-day store return policy will fall directly on December 26th—disconcertingly soon after presents are opened! Of course, some retailers have figured out that offering a more generous return policy is good for business. They know that somehow, once we've committed ourselves to something—a product, a place, or even a person—we human beings often tend to start second-guessing ourselves. Around about the midterm in an election cycle is the time when we start seeing bumper stickers saying “Don't blame me; I voted for so-and-so.” Around about the second year of a new pastor's tenure, even with the most sensitive, loving, and spiritually wise of new pastors, a congregation will start noticing the ways life hasn't become perfect yet! It happens in marriages ... in jobs ... in communities. The human tendency toward wondering if we couldn't have chosen a better option is why the Benedictine tradition of monastic life emphasizes “staying put” as the most basic of spiritual practices. One way or another, we're always going to end up finding fault with the things we thought were going to make us happy. And it's often once we get to that point that God can really get to work on us.

At any rate, our gospel reading seems to show John the Baptist experiencing a case of potential buyer's remorse. This time last Sunday we heard a gospel reading telling the story of the beginning of John's career—and it was an exciting beginning. “All of Judea,” Matthew says, was coming out to be baptized. And in the middle of all the

excitement and popularity, John made a startling prediction: someone even more important was coming.

Just after that scene, of course, Jesus himself comes to be baptized by John, and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in a stunningly public display of God's favor. It seemed clear who John's successor was. Jesus was the coming Messiah, the real deal.

But in today's gospel we've fast-forwarded to a much less cheery point in John's career. He's been arrested by King Herod and now sits rotting in prison, unsure what may become of him but knowing it's likely not to be good—and in fact he will end up being executed by Herod shortly after. His ministry is over. His death is imminent. And from the question he sends his two disciples to ask Jesus, it seems he's begun to wonder whether his successor is really everything he hoped. It looks as if an unpleasant question has begun to form in John's mind: Did I endorse the wrong guy? "Are you really the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?"

Now on the face of it, it might seem as though John's worries are ill founded. Jesus' answer to John's disciples seems pretty impressive, hearkening back to the glorious predictions we heard in today's Old Testament reading. Jesus echoes the prophet Isaiah and points out that in his ministry the blind are being given their sight, the lame are walking, the deaf are hearing again. He even adds a couple of examples for good measure: lepers are being healed, and the dead are even being brought back to life. Then finally, as if to cap it all off, he says the poor are hearing good news—perhaps, to Jesus, that's even more impressive than raising the dead. What's not to like about that?

But compare what Jesus says about himself to what John said in his prediction last week. As Pharisees and Sadducees came out to be baptized, his response was, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" John urged people to change their lives and live according to God's justice—and his motivational technique featured a heavy dose of threat. For John, the Messiah who was coming was someone who would take care of sinners by frying them in what he called an "unquenchable fire." Whereas among all the good and exciting things Jesus is doing, healing the lepers and proclaiming good news and so forth ... we have to admit there seems to be a conspicuous lack of frying.

Did John expect a more impressive Messiah—someone who would open up a can of heavenly rectitude and set sinners in their places once and for all? With Israel, the holy people of God, sadly oppressed by the Roman Empire—with expectations of liberation in the air—was John looking for something just a little more public? Here he sits in prison, wondering whether his expectations are going to come true or whether his life has been wasted. And instead of overthrowing Caesar or setting fire to God's enemies, the fellow John has placed his hopes on is going around a small corner of Galilee doing some very nice healings and proclaiming some very nice good news to the poor. "Nice little

ministry, Jesus ... but were you planning to hit the big time anytime soon?” “Tell us, are you the one who was to come, or should we be looking for another?”

Jesus does have a fuller answer to John’s question—but he doesn’t tell it to John’s disciples. Instead he sends them on their way back to John with nothing but his list of accomplishments and the cryptic comment, “Blessed is anyone who’s not offended by me”—which on its face sounds a little ridiculous, because John would probably like Jesus to go around offending a few more people in fiery fashion. But after John’s disciples leave, Jesus keeps talking to the crowds and tells them two things. No one born of woman has ever been greater than John the Baptist. And yet John is less important than the least important person in the kingdom of heaven. In one breath he praises John; in the next he puts him in his proper place.

I think what Jesus is getting at has to do with something our Lutheran sisters and brothers are good at talking about. One of the key elements of the Lutheran tradition is the relationship between the Law and the Gospel. Now Law and Gospel are not the same as Judaism and Christianity, or the Old Testament and the New Testament, because there’s plenty of Gospel in the Old Testament and plenty of Law in the New Testament. Instead, the Law and the Gospel are two simultaneous truths about God.

Here’s what the Law says: God is holy. God is incredibly holy in a way you and I will never be. God is good—in fact God is the essence of what it means to be good. And out of that holiness and goodness, God is pleased when we act in some ways. And God is saddened and angered when we act in other ways.

John the Baptist is the ultimate preacher of the Law. Change your lives, he says to God’s people: live the way God wants you to live ... *or else*.

It might be that *or else* that makes John the greatest prophet ever born—yet less great than the people of God’s kingdom.

Because John doesn’t yet grasp what *or else* really means. For John it means *or else* you get fried. But for Jesus, it means something different.

Live the way God wants you to live ... or else: or else God will come to you in person, not with punishment and fire but with forgiveness and mercy.

The word “Gospel” is the Old English word for “Good News.” And the good news Jesus has come to proclaim is this: God is love. God takes no delight in frying anyone. God is forgiving. God is tender. If you want to know exactly what kind of personality God has, look at the personality of Jesus, who is indeed the Messiah who was to come, but hardly the Messiah people would have expected.

In two weeks we'll celebrate the mystery of a Messiah who chose not to be born in a palace, but in a manger: to parents who weren't important enough to get a room at the inn. That little mystery of the manger points to an even bigger mystery of a Messiah who chose to be glorified not by riding into Jerusalem in a chariot to be crowned king, but by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey to be executed as a criminal ... and to destroy death itself by rising from the dead in the biggest mystery of all. "The dead are raised," he slips into his list of achievements as if it hardly mattered. Yet the truth is that this upside-down Messiah is transforming the world in ways John would have wept to even imagine, so much so that even as John sits awaiting his own beheading there is a hope for him beyond his own death, thanks to the power of the Messiah he thought seemed a little too weak.

"Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me," says Jesus. A couple of decades later, the apostle Paul would write about the idea of being offended by Jesus in his first letter to the Corinthians. The gospel of a crucified Messiah, Paul says, is "a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." But "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human power."¹

"Stir up your power, O Lord," we prayed in today's Collect for the Third Sunday of Advent. It's a strange sort of power: a power that has to do with tenderness and mercy. And here again today the power of God is present to offer us grace and mercy wherever we are weak. A simple table, a morsel of bread and a sip of wine: it's hardly a feast worthy of a Caesar. Yet for us it is the banquet of eternal life.

And so let us pray it once again:

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us. Amen.

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¹ 1 Corinthians 1:23-25.