

FAITH DRIVEN TO THE EDGE OF UNBELIEF
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Advent, 2025
Matthew 11:2-15

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel reading read before, Matthew 11:2–15: ²**Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to Him, “Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ⁴And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶And blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.”**

⁷**As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is he of whom it is written,**

**“ ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,
who will prepare Your way before You.’**

¹¹**Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Third Sunday in Advent traditionally emphasises joy. Our First Reading today has the desert rejoicing “*with joy and singing*” as it blossoms like the crocus and the ransomed of the Lord returning to Zion with “*everlasting joy*” upon their heads (Is. 35:1-2, 10). The reason is the coming of the Messiah, whose age will bring sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, strength to the lame, and singing to the mute.

Yet, there appears to be little joy in the Gospel where we hear that John is in prison. This remains the traditional reading for today. Why is that? The answer, and the source of joy, lies in the assurance that the “**One who is to come**” has already arrived; we need not search for another. As the sermon will emphasise, however, the blessings of Isaiah 35 that He brings should be seen as part of a greater blessing that we might overlook amid trouble.

If there was ever a man who could have a clear sense of himself from childhood, it would be John the Baptist. When Zechariah learns from the angel that he and his wife will become parents, he falls into disbelief. As a sign to Zechariah, God takes away his ability to speak. He regains speech only when the child is born and his father names him John. John’s parents may not have been as old as the one-hundred-year-old Abraham and his ninety-year-old wife, Sarah, when Isaac was born, but even conception in their seventies was a miracle. *The miracle of women giving birth long past the usual childbearing age was God’s way of showing that the child would be special.*

When Zechariah regained the ability to speak, he sang, “*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people*” (Luke 1:68). In this song, Zechariah spoke of how their child would prepare the way of God on earth. We do not know how long Elizabeth and Zechariah lived

after John was born, but what they didn't tell him of the strange circumstances surrounding his birth, *relatives and friends did*.

From his childhood, he knew that he would go before the face of the Lord to prepare His way. He would begin to lead the people out of darkness by bringing them to Christ. The stories of his birth shaped John's life. He knew who he was and what he was going to do. John had a sense about himself. He was not simply another child, but the one whom the prophet Isaiah called the voice crying in the wilderness. Valleys would be lifted up, and mountains lowered to prepare a level road for the promised Messiah. Jesus said that John was that Elijah whom Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, foretold would come before the great and terrible Day of the Lord. John would stand on the edge of darkness, pointing the people to the dawn emitting from Christ, the Sun of Righteousness. God chose John as the watchman on Zion's walls to signal the coming of a new day.

John the Baptist's sense of himself as a child was confirmed by his success as a *preacher*. He was so eloquent that some thought he was the promised Messiah. After John died, his memory had such a hold on the people that they thought Jesus was John the Baptist come back from the dead.¹ Even though John made it clear that he was not Christ, he was the last prophet that God would send, the one who would identify Jesus as the Christ. In John's pointing to Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament, God was using John to bring the old era to an end.

Those who grow up without life's ordinary disappointments often have a difficult time dealing with setbacks later in life. These setbacks can be devastating for those who have travelled a smooth road through life. This might have been true of John the Baptist, the child born to aged parents and predicted by prophecy, God's last prophet, the eloquent preacher with audiences so large that Matthew says that all Jerusalem and Judea went out to hear him. Now in his early thirties, his prominence and success have been exchanged for a prison, not because he did anything wrong, *but because he did everything right*. The man who preached that the Christ would release captives from prison could expect Jesus to spring him from prison. John, who pointed to Christ as the light of the world, could expect that the darkness of his prison could be exchanged for the brightness of day.

We know that life can become so miserable that, like Job, *we are forced to ask ourselves if God really cares for us*. Perhaps we go to the extreme and question whether God exists. John's question was a little different. He sent his disciples to ask whether Jesus was the Christ: "**Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?**" John, who had pointed to Jesus as the Messiah, toyed with the idea that he may have made a misidentification. If Jesus was not the Christ predicted by the prophets, then John's ministry was a total waste.

Some scholars cannot accept that the great preacher did not believe his own sermons; they have hypothesised that John asked this question not for himself but for his disciples. John did not want his impending execution to cause those who'd heard him preach to lose faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

Such an easy and attractive solution, putting the burden of unbelief on John's disciples and not on John himself, has no support from the Bible. This reading is about John's conflict with unbelief and how Jesus deals with it. John's doubts do not detract from his importance or his greatness. Jesus said to the crowds, "**Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.**"

Many who consider themselves Christian believe that believers will never lose their faith. They claim that those who lose their faith *never had faith*. The cliché is "*once saved, always saved.*" Wrong! For us Christians, there is never a time when faith is very far from the edge of unbelief. Satan never leaves us alone, but each day he works harder to take us away from Christ. John was no

¹ Matthew 14:2

exception. The sad reality is that preachers can lose the faith they preach to others. *Preacher and hearers are not immune to unbelief.*

A miracle is always a good solution for unbelief—or so we think. Nearly every pastor has heard the excuse that this or that person would believe if only Jesus did a miracle. But for those caught between faith and unbelief, there are no miracles. For John there are only the words of Jesus: “**The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.**” Consider the sequence. Straightening out crooked bones, restoring hearing and sight, and curing leprosy are difficult, but raising the dead is impossible. *More important than all these physical miracles is that the poor have the good news preached to them.*

No miracle will release John from imprisonment or save him from execution. He will have to be content that sins are forgiven in Christ—this is what it means that the poor have the Gospel preached to them. Faith feeds not on miracles but on the Gospel. Jesus’ answer to John concludes with this cryptic message: “**Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.**” Only the one who takes Christ at His word, regardless of life’s circumstances, will attain the blessedness God has promised in Christ. In God’s plan of salvation, we, like John, have our purpose as Christians in bringing others to Christ, but, like him, the only promise we receive is that our sins are forgiven. God calls us to Himself, and we fulfil the purpose God gives.

The accounts of John are found in all four Gospels and the Book of Acts, but he is not a New Testament figure. As a prophet, he does not see Christ’s fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies by His death and resurrection. John must get off the stage to make room for the New Testament, but this does not detract from Jesus’ extraordinary claim that “**among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.**”

However, what Jesus gives with one hand, He seems to take away with the other, saying, “**The one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.**” This could mean that even the most insignificant Christian knows things about Christ’s death and resurrection that John did not. Or is Jesus Himself the least in the kingdom of heaven? He had no place to rest His head, even though birds had nests and foxes had holes. Jesus made no claims on God. In the sight of God and of us, He was the poorest of men.

Rather than picking one option over the other, perhaps we live with both. Those who hear and believe the good news about Jesus are the poor who, by faith, are joined to Him and His poverty and are saved. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.