

Hespeler, 11 December 2022 © Scott McAndless – Advent 3
Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:46b-55, James 5:7-10, [Matthew 11:2-11](#)

John had been so sure. He had looked around at what was happening in Judea and knew that it was all wrong. This was, after all, the land that God had given to his people in order to support them as they brought a message of peace and hope to the whole world. It was there to feed their families and their children and allow them to live out their relationship with their God.

But now, though they still lived in that land, it was as if they no longer truly possessed it. The land was in the control of foreign interlopers. And it was those foreigners, together with their collaborators among the people, who enjoyed the riches of a Promised Land that flowed with milk and honey. John knew that that was not what God intended.

A Model of Conquest

There was a biblical model for how the people could repossess the land – the Joshua model. After God had led the people out of the land of Egypt and after they had wandered for a full generation in the wilderness, they finally came to the border. They stood there on the eastern bank of the Jordan River and they looked upon that land in all of its beauty and splendour. Just one barrier remained: the river. Once they had passed it, the real work of possessing the land could begin.

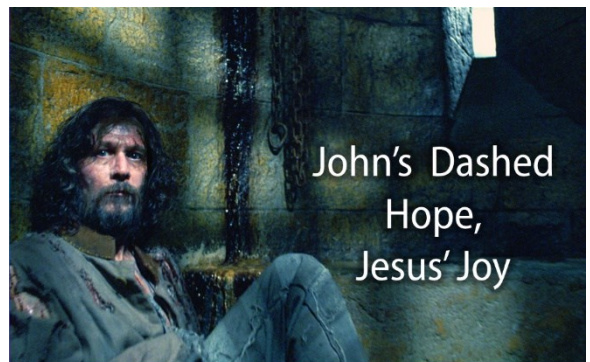
And of course John knew – everyone knew – the incredible story of that crossing, how the LORD had led the people down the banks and into the river. And so holy was the passage of God with the people that the water parted before them, and they came out renewed and cleansed and ready to take possession of the land that God had given them.

And that, John decided, was what needed to happen again. Now, John knew that he was no Joshua. He was not the one to lead the conquest of the land. But he felt that he could do the first part.

John's Baptism

And so, he called the people to come out to the Jordan River, and out they came! They came in such numbers that it seemed as if all of Judea and the whole city of Jerusalem had heeded his call. He brought them to the far bank, and he began to re-enact the great crossing. He took them one-by-one down into the Jordan and then up on the opposite bank. They came up from the water renewed and cleansed, ready to possess the land again.

And, yes, it was true that the water did not part before them as it had in ancient times. Instead, they were baptized into the waters of the Jordan. Perhaps the waters would part when the new Joshua came. But in the meantime, John felt as if he had done his part. He had prepared the way.



Yeshua

And now you can perhaps understand why John was so excited, one day, when an extraordinary man arrived at the Jordan. The first thing that John noticed about him was that his name was Yeshua. Someday someone would translate that name into Greek and it would become Jesus, but no one had ever called him that yet. In the local language, Aramaic, his name was Yeshua. The reason why that caught John's attention was because that was the Aramaic form of the Hebrew name Joshua.

And, as John looked at this Yeshua who stood before him, he could not help but think that he might be the Joshua he had been waiting for – the Joshua who would lead a new conquest of the Promised Land. There was a charisma to him, he had a way of speaking with authority and power. Here was someone who really could command a new conquest.

John's Promise

John had been promising the people who came out to him that, if they went through with his baptism, someone else would come to lead them. This is how he described that leader: **"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."**

As he looked at this man, Yeshua, John wondered if he might not be that man.

John Arrested

But things did not go very well for John after that. The Romans began to notice what he was doing, and it seemed like insurgency to them – which it kind of was. I guess they didn't want to bother with him themselves, so they got King Herod of Galilee to take care of him. Herod also ruled over Perea on the east bank of the Jordan where John was operating. Herod didn't need much convincing by the Romans though. He had heard that John had been saying bad things about his marriage. He gleefully arrested John and threw him in prison.

And it is one thing to believe that God is about to intervene and give your people back their land when you are standing boldly and free on the banks of the Jordan River. But it is quite another to hold onto that hope when you are locked in Herod's dungeon, when you start to forget what the sun looks like and when you are fed so poorly that you begin to long for the taste of the grasshoppers you used to eat in the wilderness. John began to fall into despair.

The Most Discouraging Thing

But what particularly bothered him was what he was hearing about this Yeshua. The reports coming back about him didn't make it seem like was busy clearing threshing floors and burning chaff with unquenchable fire.

Instead of taking on the Romans, he seemed to be spending all of his time helping out the sick, blind and lame. Rather than attacking the wealthy collaborators for profiteering off the occupation, he seemed to put too much effort into reaching out to the poor with encouragement and good

news. What kind of Joshua was this? It was naive to think that the Promised Land could be retaken only by such acts of gentleness and kindness?

So John's hope which he had placed in this man who seemed to have such potential, appeared to be dashed. It was that, more than the darkness and the dankness of his prison that had broken his spirit. If he could believe that that new conquest was coming, that the forces he had prepared in the waters of the Jordan would be led to victory, he would have been willing to put up with anything and even to die without regret. But this uncertainty was killing his spirit.

And that is why, when a couple of his old disciples came to visit him, he sent them to ask. He told them to find this Yeshua and say, **"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"**

The Church's Situation

In many ways, I think that the picture we have of John the Baptist in our reading this morning from the Gospel of Matthew is a pretty good picture of where we often feel in the church today. You know, there was a time not all that long ago when the Christian church felt as if it could just take over the whole of our culture and lead us all into a new Promised Land. Like John at the height of his popularity out at the Jordan River, the Christian Church could count legions of people spread throughout our society among its numbers. We had all been baptized and we were sent out to conquer the whole land in the name of Christ.

That was the mission and that is how we often spoke of it. Those were the heady days of Christianity and I know that many people still remember them. Indeed, many still think of the mission of the church in exactly those terms. But the last few decades of the Christian experience have shown us that we may be needing to rethink that mission. And, like John sitting in jail and stewing in his disappointment, we have been feeling a little bit depressed as we watch it.

General Decline

Over the last few decades, the church has not exactly gone from triumph to triumph. Various abuse scandals in various denominations – and there are none who have been entirely spared this, including our own denomination – have certainly tarnished the reputation of the church in the eyes of many. How can the church be part of a glorious conquest of society if it has been shown to be so very flawed?

And, of course, alongside of that we have seen that the continual growth in numbers of Christians has leveled off and fallen into decline. This, also, is something that has struck across denominational lines. I know you may have heard that it was just the mainline and liberal churches that were in decline, and that may have been true for a while. But most recently that decline has spread to the more conservative and fundamentalist churches as well. In the most recent years the decline has been right across the board.

I know there are always a few exceptions here or there, but the overall trend is pretty clear. Recent census reports showed us that, for example, Wales and England are no longer majority Christian countries. You can bet that many other countries are about to follow that trend. And it is not particularly because of immigration or the growth of other religions, though that has been part

of it. In fact, the fastest growing religious group around the globe has consistently been that group who claim no religious identity whatsoever.

Falling into Doubt

What do we do with that as believers living in our society today? I suspect many of us, just like John, have fallen into all kinds of doubts and questions. Is this the movement that we were promised? Where is the promise of the triumph and continual growth of the church that's going to transform our society? And so, like John, we would like to send to Jesus and ask, "Is this what you promised would come, or should we be looking for something else?"

And this is where Jesus' answer to John is, I think, exactly what the church needs to hear today. When John asks Jesus where is the proof that he is the fulfillment of all of God's promises, Jesus doesn't point to the kind of success that John experienced on the banks of the river. He doesn't point to the size of his crowds, even though, of course, Jesus had drawn a number of disciples. The answer that Jesus sends back is this: **"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 good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."**

The Sign of the Kingdom

What is the sign that we are part of what God is doing in the world? What is the sign that God is creating the conditions that bring about the kingdom? Only this, that the people who are living on the margins of society, the people whose plight is often forgotten by those in power, are experiencing healing and hope even when things look bleak. And if we, with our outreach and efforts to care for the people around us, are part of that work, then we are part of the kingdom. This is the work that God calls us to do. These are the signs of his kingdom. That is what Jesus is saying.

And yes, I do believe that if we do that kind of work with integrity, we will draw other people to join us, and our numbers will have an impact on society. But things like the overwhelming growth in numbers and attendance, these are not the proof of the coming kingdom. If we keep to the work that God has given us to do, we can count on God taking care of the rest.

A Subtle Jibe

Jesus does include the subtlest jibe at John the Baptist when he ends his answer by saying, **"And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."** People will take offense if we concentrate on reaching out to the poor and marginalized. They will say that that is not what victory for God's kingdom is about. But they are wrong, and I would rather claim God's blessing on our work by continuing to reach out with whatever resources our God places in our hands.

My friends, we ought not to despair for the future of the church. That is in God's hands and that is always the best place for anything to be. And so long as we continue in that work, I believe we will find the joy that Jesus found in the work that he was doing, joy that can penetrate even the darkest prison.