

Sermon
December 11, 2022
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10 • Luke 1:46b-55 • James 5:7-10 • Matthew 11:2-11

Certainty. Wanting to be sure of what we are seeing – or what we are feeling. Wondering if there is a way to measure our knowledge, and to “prove it”. And doubt – that we are wrong. That we have misunderstood. That we have made a mistake. These things come from a place deep in our humanity. In our Gospel passage John’s question “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” is brimming with doubt. Doubt weaves its way into all of our Advent themes: Waiting: How long? Repentance: Which way to turn around? Expectation: What am I looking for? Will I recognize it? Sometimes, we might be afraid to admit that we have doubts. We might feel that faith should overcome doubt. That joy at the celebration of the Incarnation should overcome sorrow that we might feel at this time of year. That hope for the coming of the kingdom should overcome despair we might feel at the current situation.

Our readings today assure us that this isn’t the way it works. This Gospel passage brings us a picture of John that is “both”. Both a fiery preacher, prophet, preparer of the way, *and* a faltering, questioning seeker of assurance in this question. “Are you the one?” It is not one or the other – certainty or doubt, joy or sorrow, hope or despair – but both, together. God holds us in the place between all these things. Too much certainty can make us closed, complacent, even. Too much doubt can also make us closed, afraid to move. In that place between, God holds us, and says “Work with me”. *We need God, and God needs us – to do the work of transformation – transforming ourselves, each other, our world.*

For us, on this side of the Resurrection, we are blessed with the answer to John’s question: “Are you the one?” Yes! Jesus was and is the one. Note Jesus’s answer to John’s question, though. Jesus does not offer John a “yes”. Jesus responds with “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

People expected to see a dramatic, kingly Messiah. Jesus's answer is a call to stop looking for that, and to recognize that the kingdom comes in the blind receiving their sight. In the lame walking, and in the lepers being cleansed. These people were on the margins of that society, and Jesus healed them, reconciled them with the world around them. Jesus tells John: this reconciliation, this restoration is your Messiah at work – this is the coming of the kingdom. John had doubts, and Jesus's response to him was: look around, now.

We journey through Advent preparing for the celebration of Jesus's birth. At the same time, we anticipate the fulfilment of the kingdom, and Christ's return as the light of the world. Jesus's answer to John's question "Are you the one?" offers us a powerful reminder about the present. We have doubts – when will the kingdom come? where is joy? how do I know which way to go? – and Jesus's response is the same as it was to John: look around, now. Our WordCloud exercise – with today's questions "What joy am I waiting for?" and "What signs of joy do I see around me and in the world?" has us look around, now.

Just as we are held – suspended – by faith and doubt together, we are held, here, in God's love, in the present. Jesus frees us to live in the now. Jesus has taken care of the past; we are reconciled, saved, forgiven. We know in and through Jesus that the future is taken care of as well. With past and present taken care of, this means that we, as Christians, are free to live wholly in the present. This freedom isn't about being passive, though.

Advent reminds us that a new way – a new world – is possible. Our readings today remind us of that potential, and they remind us that we have a part in realizing that potential. Our passage from Isaiah sings a song of restoration. "The wilderness and dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom," the blind shall see, the deaf hear, the lame dance, and the speechless sing. Healing of our world is possible, but not without our involvement. Restoration and reconciliation in our humanity is possible, but not without our action. Our passage from James speaks to patience, but not to passivity. To wait patiently is not to do nothing. The overall message of James is not passive. It is a letter about activism, and care for those in need. To be patient is to persevere in the now, even when we have doubts, even when we long for certainty about how the kingdom will be fulfilled and what it looks like. Mary's voice in our Canticale, and the text of the hymn that we'll sing after this – The Canticale of the Turning – reminds us that God continues to turn us and the world toward peace, hope, joy, and love. God's

invitation to us to join in this turning – turning in ourselves toward God, and overturning oppression and injustice in our world – continues.

There is a turning that we do with our perspectives, with our view of the world. Sam Wells – you’ll be realizing by now that I am a big fan of his! – describes a certain kind of prayer as Transfiguration Prayer. This is a prayer that seeks a new vision of what is before us. It is a prayer for new eyes, for a “fresh perspective”. We need all kinds of prayer, but a prayer for new vision is one that lets us live into the present and that holds us on this life’s journey in a place between certainty and doubt.

We do have a sure and certain hope in God’s love for us, made known in Jesus. We do have an abiding hope that this love will be revealed to us in its fullness in the world to come. This does not mean that we cannot and will not have doubts about our present reality. That we won’t feel despair at our current situation. God invites us, in and through Jesus, to hold those feelings with that hope. We are invited to look for the kingdom not in the past or the future, but in the now. We are invited to look around, now, and to join hearts and hands to bring about the kind of reconciliation that Jesus points to in today’s Gospel passage and that Mary sings of in the Magnificat. We are to look for where we might be the one to reach out to someone on the margins of our society. We are to look for ways that we might be the one to bring about healing – of ourselves, of others, our world. I pray a transfiguration prayer for all of us: that this Advent we will see ourselves, each other, our world with “new eyes” and that this fresh perspective will carry us forward to a place of transformation. To a place of healing, and restoration. To a place where we can see, and be, the kingdom, now. Amen.