

## **Matthew 11:2-11**

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.’

## **Are You the One?** - December 15, 2019

*Matthew 11:2-11*

Last week, we had our first encounter with John the Baptizer. We met the man who was the forerunner to Jesus. The man whom God called to announce the coming of the Messiah. The man who, according to Jesus, was the greatest prophet to ever preach to the people of Israel.

Last week, we met a man at the full height of his power to influence the people. The scripture records that people came from all over Jerusalem to hear him, repent of their sins, and get baptized in the Jordan River. Here was a man who literally scared the religious establishment into at least pretending that they went along with John's message of change and rebuilding their relationship with God.

John was indeed the whistleblower of his time. He called out the hypocrisy of the priests and scribes who kept themselves powerful while extracting every penny they could from regular folks. John even took on the King, King Herod. John called out Herod breaking certain marriage laws and dared to accuse him of not obeying the very laws he was supposed to enforce. The nerve!

And Herod reacted the same way all tyrants, or wannabe tyrants of every era react when they are accused of hypocrisy: they try to silence those who tell the truth. They do their best to sideline or even eliminate their opponents. They accuse them of disloyalty and treason. And, if they can, they have them arrested and thrown into jail. Over 200 years ago, the United States fought a war against an English King who was doing the exact same thing to us. However, as we sadly know, not much changes, even now, does it? The powerful like staying in power and will say or do anything they think they can get away with so they can keep their power.

So, for the crime of telling the truth, for the crime of holding the powerful accountable, for the crime of being the whistleblower, John the Baptizer found himself in jail. We all know that in many countries in the world, honest women and men have gone to jail and have been tortured and even killed simply because they told the truth. We know that even in this country, where freedom of speech is guaranteed by the constitution, brave men and women throughout our history have been attacked verbally, ridiculed on social media, imprisoned, and killed by challenging leaders and speaking truth.

It has been this way since our nation started. It is this very same way right now.

So is it any wonder that in today's scripture, we encounter a very different John the Baptizer. Today, we meet John again, but this time, John is in jail. In jail simply because he spoke truth to power and power didn't like it one bit.

Friends, I suspect that there is not one of us in this room who has not felt anger and frustration at what we believe to be our so-called superiors abusing their power, obstructing investigations into their conduct, and making life hell for us, our friends, our families, our co-workers, and many others. There is no question that there have been times, not only in the past, but even now, when

we just want to scream about how those in authority are mistreating us — of whatever shape or kind. Too many of those in authority are indeed abusing us and taking advantage of us and expecting us to approve of their behavior.

Yes, we are angry. Yes, we are frustrated. And yes, we remember John the Baptizer and the many others both before and after him. But at the end of the day we say nothing and we do nothing. There are times when we may hate ourselves for our inaction. On the other hand, doing and saying nothing is often the only reasonable thing we can do when compared with losing our lives or jobs.

The simple fact is that we cannot get outraged at everything. Once we have jobs, once we're making a living, once we're supporting a family, once we're caring for our aging parents, once we have to finance a mortgage, save for our retirements or pay medical bills, or college tuition, or any of dozens of things we are obligated to do in life, taking risks in life is incredibly hard.

There is no way, unless you are single and nobody is dependent on you, that you can afford to take risks in life — at least risks that could cost you anything and everything.

So not by choice, but by necessity, we stay quiet. We shut up. We rage inside, but we pretend everything is OK on the outside. And yes, such is life.

That, friends, is where we meet John the Baptizer today. Today we find a very different John. We find a man who told the truth, put it out there, angered the authorities, and then as a result knows the cold reality that he has weeks, maybe is even days away from death.

I expect that for each one of us there have indeed been times in our lives when we did take risks, not knowing whether the outcome would help us or hurt us. There have been times when we risked a lot and subsequently gained a lot. Yet, there have also been times when we risked a lot and things did not turn out as we expected. The nature of risk is such that just because we risk a lot does not necessarily guarantee that the outcomes will be in our favor.

John the Baptizer told the truth every day of his life. He risked the anger of the religious and secular authorities. For years he got away with it. But there came the day that he didn't.

John spent his ministry telling people about a Messiah who would change the world. In John's view, he expected the Messiah to bring a new era of power and prosperity to Israel by overthrowing the Romans, and false the Israelite Kings, and the priests, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. John proclaimed a Messiah who would take down the rich and elevate the poor. John promised a new way was coming.

So Jesus shows up and John himself, despite his objections, baptizes Jesus in the Jordan — baptizes Jesus just like he baptized all the other folks who came his way. Of course John objected to baptizing Jesus. In John's view, Jesus hardly needed baptizing. Jesus was destined to be the one who would transform the world and rid Israel of all the greedy, power hungry people who were

making life hell for regular folks. Why should Jesus be baptized? He had no need to repent of anything!

Friends, we'll take up that question in a few weeks. However, let us just say for now that John expected a whole new world when Jesus arrived on the scene.

The problem for John was simple: Jesus wasn't doing what John thought Jesus was supposed to do.

Imagine you're John. Imagine that you've spent your life talking about God — talking about this promised one who was going to change the world. Imagine that you've literally risked everything to stand up for this guy. Imagine that you totally expected the establishment to collapse and the powerful to be overthrown.

Imagine all this — and then the harsh reality sets in: none of what John expected happened, not even close. The Romans were still in power. The priests, Pharisees, and Sadducees still dominated the religious establishment. And worst of all, John found himself foundering in jail.

Friends, we've all been tied up in situations where all our hopes, expectations, and dreams have been destroyed. Perhaps you're going through such a time right now. All the assumptions you've made about life and living have been taken from you. The foundation on which you have built your life has collapsed. The men and women you thought you knew are suddenly acting and talking in ways far different from what you expected.

Is it any wonder that John sent his friends to ask Jesus to if He was the Messiah? Was Jesus indeed the Savior, the one who would restore Israel, drive out the hated Romans, the corrupt monarchy, and the apostate religious establishment? John had plenty of reason to doubt, just as there are many times in our lives when we have plenty of reason to doubt.

But the good news of this scripture, the good news for John, the good news for us is clear: doubt is OK with Jesus. I'll repeat: doubt is OK with Jesus.

Look at what happened when Jesus received the question from John's friends. Did Jesus get angry? No. Did Jesus criticize John and his followers? No. Did Jesus make John feel bad or embarrass him publicly? No. I know that nowadays it is common to have our leaders use social media to try and shame anyone who questions them. But Jesus, far from condemning John, understood him, loved him, and accepted his question.

And Jesus accepts our doubts, our fears, our questions because for us, such things are perfectly human and perfectly natural.

So what does Jesus do instead? Rather than attack or embarrass John, Jesus assures him that yes, Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah. However, the way Jesus demonstrates that he is the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior — the way Jesus demonstrates this wonderful fact to the world is far different from what John and nearly everyone else expected.

Jesus' proof that He is the Messiah is simple: 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. In other words, the way Jesus brings God's love and God's intervention into the lives of human beings is not from the top down, but from the bottom up. In other words. Jesus' ministry is not going to follow human notions of what power is. Jesus was not about hating the powers-that-be into submission, but instead Jesus is all about loving the least, last, and the lost to demonstrate that the Realm of God belongs to everyone: especially those whom society rejects!

Jesus message is this to those who want to change the world and rid it of all the oppressors who are trying to ruin our lives. Love your enemies. Do to others what you want them to do to you. Stand up for the poor, the widows, the orphans, and all those who cannot speak for themselves.

If the goal of true religion is simply to destroy the powers-that-be, as John thought would happen, we will fail. All we succeed in doing is tearing down the old oppressive structures and replacing them with new oppressive structures. Over and over and over again, John's way — and I must say they way of most human beings — has been to tolerate and promote systems that enshrine an oppressive hierarchy of some sort, until people get tired of it and welcome an alternative replacement oppressive hierarchy. Over and over and over again.

But Jesus' way ends the cycle of oppression. Instead of proclaiming a realm of power, Jesus preaches and teaches and realm of love, where we all accept each other and love each other and cherish our differences instead of condemning them.

Yes, this is a completely upside down way of thinking. Yes, this is a way of being few believe can happen. Yes, Jesus' way breaks down the structures and powers. And yes, Jesus' way brings plenty of doubt in even his closest followers. Jesus' way is not something they were used to and frankly, it is not something we are used to.

There is a quintessentially Russian language phrase: Kto-Kovo? or Who-Whom? In other words, who can do what to whom. That is the foundation of human behavior. We are conditioned to think in terms of power. Someone must be strong. Someone must be weak. A few are winners, most of us are losers.

But Jesus came to change the human idea of who can do what to whom into who can build up or help whom. Are we in this life just for us and maybe our families? Or are we here to use our gifts, talents and abilities to raise up each other to be all God created us to be? John's way or Jesus' way? In our lives, we must ask ourselves the most important question of all. For us, for you, for me, is Jesus truly the one?

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.