

**Highland Presbyterian Church**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent**  
**“Hidden Promises”**  
**A sermon by Megan McCarty**

Luke 1:46-55

Matthew 11:2-11

In last week’s sermon, we heard the stirring words of John the Baptist at the Jordan River concerning “the one who is to come.” He said that the Messiah who is coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire and brimstone, he will come with winnowing fork in hand, and he will exercise judgment. Now, John’s own ministry carried a healthy dose of judgment and seemed to have roots in the book of Malachi, which says that the one who prepares the way for the day of the Lord’s coming refines and purifies the people with both soap and fire.

But Jesus’ actual ministry on earth, in contrast, focused on healing, exorcism, and public banquets with tax collectors and sinners—in other words, strong on healing and restoration, but weak on judgment and vindication as John had predicted. Jesus comes on the scene as the one who proclaims the kingdom of God and calls upon people to trust in God’s goodness. It makes sense, then, that John, who is in these verses sitting in prison with a lot of time to think, questions whether or not Jesus is “the one to come.” Jesus fits neither John’s expectations nor those of Jewish messianism in general. John’s question is therefore totally understandable: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

John’s question may express a hopeful sense that Jesus is indeed the one expected to carry out the restoration of God’s people, or it may convey exasperation, impatience, or even doubt, about whether Jesus is the Messiah, or at least about why he doesn’t express his identity more forcefully. As John sits in Herod’s prison, awaiting death, he may be wondering if and when the liberation of God’s people from bondage and oppression will really take place. So far, the dominion of Rome and of local rulers like Herod Antipas and the Jerusalem priesthood remains undisturbed. What kind of messiah leaves the forerunner in prison?

At the heart of Jesus’ reply to John is the question of how we come to discern God’s power and presence in our midst, both in the ministry of John as the forerunner and in Jesus, who brings to fruition God’s redemption for all of creation. Jesus does not simply give a yes nor a no answer to John’s question. It is typical of the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus does not openly declare that he is the Messiah. He always wants to make sure that he does not promote himself; instead, he proclaims the kingdom of God: look at what is happening around you; the kingdom is breaking in upon the world.

Today, we may find ourselves asking similar questions: if the kingdom of God is supposedly breaking in upon the world, why is our world still marked by exploitation, injustice, polarization, and violence? If we are about to celebrate the birth of the Messiah who was and is to come, why are we still waiting for good news? How long must we wait? Will those who suffer really be redeemed, or should we start looking for something else?

In these passages, as in the ministry of Jesus, the blind, the deaf, the poor, et cetera, do not just refer to the individuals Jesus heals, but they refer metaphorically to the condition of God's people, even including John and Jesus' own disciples. Those who are blind and deaf can refer to those who refuse to see and hear the good news. The poor and those in need of physical healing can refer to those in desperate need of freedom from whatever bondage they find themselves entangled. The raising of the dead can mean those whose spirits are so low they are a shell of who they are intended to be.

Putting this question in John's mouth may simply be Matthew's way of putting the question of discipleship directly in front of us, of making John's question really our own, and thus facing us with the issues of faith and unbelief, of blessing and offense, which are at the heart of this gospel.

If we are to receive this Jesus as God's Messiah "for us," then it will call for a dramatic new creation of those who are made to hear and see in new ways. Our expectations and our hopes need reshaping. Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." Such seeing will need to be shaped both by the visions and hopes of those who have gone before as well as needing to be shaped by what is happening here and now among us. Where do we see the creative power of God at work amid the suffering of this world? Where do the blind, the lame, the sick, the poor have good news brought to them? And where do we find ourselves to be instruments of God's creative power?

This new way of hearing and seeing will return us to the theme of repentance and renewal that were part of John's message last week. It is part of Jesus' message to disciples as well. "Be not only hearers but doers," he says at the end of his sermon on the mount. "Let anyone with ears listen," he teaches in his parables. "Many have longed to see and hear what you have and did not," he reminds his disciples.

To hear and see in this way is to acknowledge that Jesus is indeed the one who is to be born in a few short weeks and who is coming as God's Messiah. It is to believe that there is power for new creation in God's call to each of us as disciples, to be transformed by repentance to bear fruits of love and mercy. It is to know that the deeds and words of renewal and hope that take shape in us and in our world are marks of God's salvation.

Is this Jesus indeed the Messiah for us? This question is one that is so easy to dismiss. God's promises are sometimes easy to miss, even when they are right in front of our faces. They can be hidden in plain sight. And that's not something for us to feel bad about. God's promise is so radical that even someone as great as John can miss it as he looks for the mercy and justice of God in the wrong key. But when he does this, he also risks missing the kingdom when it arrives.

On Wednesday my oldest daughter came home from school sick. And, it turns out, when you have two children and one of them comes home sick... you can do the math on this one. So, Friday morning my other one wakes up sick. On Thursday, I drove across town for an in-person

meeting and as I arrive, I pull up the email to see what room we are meeting in and the email says, “here’s the link for the Zoom meeting”...

This season has so many demands on our time and if you are the primary caregiver for young children or old children or parents, or yourself... every little annoyance and inconvenience can feel so much larger. And if you aren’t running around like a chicken with its head cut off at Christmas time, maybe you are experiencing something worse. Maybe it’s the first or fifth or whatever number of holidays without a parent, significant other, child, or one you love. Maybe you are experiencing the deep, profound emptiness and grief that the holidays can produce.

Whatever it is that is clouding our experience of this Advent season, it’s understandable. It is easy to miss these promises of God that aren’t actually hidden, but can feel like it. The Luke passage this morning tells of Mary’s song. She knew exactly who this baby was and why it is so important that she was chosen to carry him and be his mother. She tells of God’s promises throughout history and understands that her life also fits into those amazing blessings. Do we know that our lives fit into these stories, too?

To be able to answer a “Yes” to John’s question of knowing who the Messiah is, is to know that we have experienced what Matthew means by the “blessing” of God. It is to have truly experienced what the Advent expectation is all about in its promise to transform our vision and hope. There are lots of reasons why this season is difficult. Lots of reasons why God’s promise of a savior feels far away and hidden from us.

Jesus tells John that God’s kingdom is breaking into the world around him and it is here, too. God’s promises are surrounding us this Advent season, even if they feel impossible to find. Sometimes, all it takes to notice them is stopping and being intentional, simplifying things. Sometimes it takes a big, deep breath in the midst of chaos or working to get yourself to church to hear the blessing of our orchestra play or taking noticing when you receive a Christmas card knowing that someone else was thinking about you this holiday season. This season is hard. But the birth of our savior is coming and his life on earth allows the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, the lepers to be healed, the dead to be raised, and good news to be proclaimed to the poor. May it be so with us as well this season. Amen.