

Sermon, Advent 3, Matthew 11:2-11, James 5:7-10 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

Last month, our quarterly book club had an author come talk to us in person: Teri Ott, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook* and author of the book *Necessary Risks*. Shortly before she came to Richmond, Teri was reflecting about last Sunday's reading and asked me why I love John the Baptist so much. She said, "I know you even have a John the Baptist doll," which irritated me, as I expressed to her, because I do not have John the Baptist *dolls*. I have a John the Baptist puppet and a John the Baptist nutcracker. Puppets and nutcrackers are not dolls.

Regardless of her unintentional insult, I pondered Teri's question on my walk that morning ruminating over John in the third chapter of Matthew's Gospel: the eating of locusts and the camel hair clothing. As I walked, I reflected on John hollering repent and calling people a brood of vipers. I love his honesty, his bluntness, his bravery in expressing unpopular opinions. John is hard core and prophetic, and as someone who often tries to balance between extremes, I admire that prophetic streak in him. He did not care what anyone thought of him.

But as I was explaining all this in my head to Teri, I realized that as much as I admire and enjoy the John the Baptist in Matthew 3, he would not be one of my favorite biblical characters without his depiction in today's reading from Matthew 11, because despite John the Baptist's firm beliefs and preaching last week, in this this week's reading, which took place later, John expressed doubt. He was in prison.

Imagine that for a moment. Imagine what John's prison cell would have been like two thousand years ago. Prison has never been pleasant: that's kind of the point; but incarcerated people today are entitled to humane treatment that did not exist in John's day. Eventually, remember, John would end up losing his head because of the foolishness of a king.

So there was John, who had lived in the wilderness—who therefore loved the outdoors: there was John, deprived of fresh air and freedom, locked up because he had insulted the king's wife. When John the Baptist declared last week that the powerful one coming after him would burn the chaff with unquenchable fire, he most likely believed that meant that Jesus was going to overthrow the oppressive Roman government and therefore also puppet tyrants like Herod. But instead, Jesus was wandering around preaching and healing peacefully. Back when Jesus showed up to the Jordan to be baptized, John the Baptist knew exactly who he was. He didn't want to baptize him because he felt unworthy. John said to Jesus then, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John saw the Spirit descending like a dove and heard God's own voice from heaven.

John knew. And yet now, imprisoned, he sent his disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

That question, that doubt, is perhaps the main reasons I love John the Baptist so much. He was a hard-core prophet, and indeed, as Jesus himself says in today's reading, John was a prophet and a messenger and the one trusted to prepare the way of the Lord. And he also questioned everything during his own darkest days from a prison cell.

Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

I believe that doubt is a key part of faith. Every year on the first Sunday after Easter, the faithful few who gather hear again the story of the disciple Thomas, who was skeptical when the others told him that they had seen the Lord. And Thomas, I believe, was one of the most faithful. Probably the bravest, who had been outside of that upper room, out in the world, when the rest were huddled together, afraid. Thomas was faithful, and brave, and skeptical.

John was a hard-core prophet who gave everything to God, and for at least a moment in prison, he doubted that Jesus was the one. If Jesus was the one, why was John languishing in prison?

Jesus did not go to John after he heard John's question, nor did he reply with "Yes, of course I am the one." Instead, Jesus sent John's disciples back with instructions to tell John what they had seen and heard.

I wonder what John thought of this response. The Bible doesn't tell us. We don't hear directly from John again. A few chapters later, we hear about the horrible and senseless way John died after his disciples buried what was left of his body and went and told Jesus.

I suspect John was tired of being patient. Aren't you tired? I know I am. I detest waiting. Today's letter from James implores us to be patient, like a farmer waiting for a seed. Whenever I'm admonished to be patient, I see red, but the analogy to a farmer helps. A farmer does have to wait, and much is out of her control, including the weather. But a farmer also prepares soil, plants seeds, waters, weeds, and nurtures.

In Advent, we are not only waiting to observe Jesus' birthday, but we await his second coming. We can prepare our own soil. How do you cultivate your relationship with God? There isn't one right away, but we must be intentional. Careful. Thoughtful—like a farmer preparing soil and getting rid of weeds. Plucking fruit at the perfect time.

No matter how we care for the landscape of our faith, events will happen that challenge us. If you have never experienced doubt, I am sorry to tell you that eventually it will come. Your faith will be challenged. And the way that you have cultivated your faith may make a difference in how you weather that doubt.

We don't know what happened to John the Baptist after Jesus sent his disciples back and told them to report what they were seeing and hearing, but I believe that the hard work of preparation that John had done all of his life sustained him, so that when he was martyred, John died with dignity and hope, knowing that he would be in paradise soon.