

December 11, Third Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

## **Jesus' ministry is not what John the Baptist expected it to be.**

by [Katie Hines-Shah](#) in the [November 22, 2016](#) issue

December is so dark. There is a reason we light candles, sing songs, and gather together this time of year. In the Northern Hemisphere we do these things not just for the sheer joy of the season but to stave off the darkness crowding the doorway and nipping at our heels.

It's worth mentioning this because everything in our culture this time of year tells us we are supposed to be happy: glossy magazines, manipulative TV specials, mass-produced Christmas cards, grocery store circulars. Inevitably we end up disappointed. The turkey is dry, the airport crowded; the shiny boxes that might have contained Lego sets and American Girl dolls hold school clothes and underpants instead. Even the church fails to deliver. The baby angels will be off pitch, the sermon inadequately uplifting, the crowd at the midnight mass a little thinner than last year.

And these are just the minor disappointments. Therapists and pastors know to save room on their calendars in December. Loss is magnified in a season of light. Empty places at the dining room table can't be ignored. Job loss and debt are revealed in the paucity of the feast or the scarcity of presents. When there is no comfort and joy, faith falters.

The story goes that John the Baptist was born on the summer solstice. Six months older than Jesus, quick enough at the Visitation to leap in his mother's womb, John is a figure of dynamism, judgment, and light. John's brightness lays sin bare; his prophecy calls down fire.

Yet as this week's Gospel passage opens, John finds himself alone in a dark prison cell. Suddenly, he who recognized Jesus as the Messiah seems to harbor doubts. "Are you the one who is to come," John asks Jesus through his disciples, "or are we

to wait for another?”

In ancient prisons, prisoners were cared for by friends and family, their needs provided not by the state but by supporters. News passed freely. So John must know something of Jesus’ ministry. In the preceding chapters of Matthew, Jesus has cleansed a leper, caused the lame to walk, restored sight to the blind, and raised the dead. John surely knows all these stories.

He may also know that this litany of miracles follows a pattern set by Isaiah. In today’s first reading familiar themes emerge: the eyes of the blind are opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame leap like a deer. Jesus’ reply to John references not just this passage from Isaiah but others as well. One wonders if John is waiting for Jesus to fulfill Isaiah 61:1, “liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” Perhaps this most personal of dashed hopes causes his doubts to rise.

Some cast aspersions on John for this supposed lapse. Some see it as evidence that John never reaches heaven, taking literally Jesus’ final words in this passage (“the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”). But it seems churlish to hold a condemned man’s fears against him. Jesus’ ministry, after all, is not much like John’s. The complaints of John’s disciples throughout Matthew’s Gospel serve to highlight the fact—Jesus is not what John expected. There’s more feasting, less fasting; less condemnation, more grace. At this moment it seems there is more darkness, less light.

Jesus seems especially generous with John in pointing out his blind spot. John, though the greatest among women born, is also not entirely what the people expected. He is unlike the official leaders of the Hebrew people. He is no “reed shaken” by the winds of Rome. John wears camel’s hair in the place of soft royal robes. He surpasses the great men of his day and those before. This is good news—especially to the downtrodden and the poor. John is “more than a prophet.” He is the one who ushers in the new age of the Messiah, even though he won’t live to see its fruition.

And therein lies the crux of the story. It is always darkest before the dawn. The cross comes before the empty tomb, death before resurrection’s light. For Jesus’ followers this is an offense, a “scandal” in the Greek. John will not be the last to doubt or even desert. Jesus’ family will question his ministry. The disciples will flee and hide. Judas

will betray him; Peter will deny him. And yet this will not stop the coming of the kingdom. We can't blame them for their wavering. Like John the Baptist, these first followers of Jesus don't know the end of Jesus' story.

But we do. Our waiting is different from John's. We know how this story ends: in hope and promise and light. And those of us who suffer and sorrow this season remember that the Messiah comes to his glory through the cross.

Jesus comes to be fully one of us—to know our joy and sorrow, our goodness and sin, our life and death. Jesus will know what it is to be poor, to lose someone you love, to be friendless, to suffer. Jesus will, like John, face an imprisonment that ends in death. If we had any question before, Jesus' ministry makes it plain: there is no place we can go where the Messiah will not be present. Not even our doubts and fears. Jesus comes into these places and redeems them.

In these dark days before the solstice—before hope dawns—we are not alone. The Messiah is not in the glittering fantasy of advertising, the false promise of materialism, even the idol of a perfect family. When we seek him in those places we are bound to be disappointed. Jesus meets us instead in our Christmas disappointments and doubts, our loneliness and our longing. Those who wait in darkness will see a great light.