

12.17.2017 Advent 3 (Matthew 11:2-10)

I once read a story titled *The Devil's Garage Sale*. In this story, our enemy was having a garage sale and all his tools were on display. There were tools made to tear others down, so that they could be used as stepping stones. There were lenses for sale that magnified your own importance, and made everyone else look really small. Against the wall at the devil's garage was an assortment of gardening tools guaranteed to help your pride grow by leaps and bounds: the rake of scorn, the shovel of contempt, the tools of gossip, backbiting, and selfishness. Everything for sale was pleasing to the eye and came complete with fabulous promises and guarantees of prosperity. Prices were steep, but credit was, of course, extended to one and all. The devil's payment plan was stated this way: "Take it home and use it, you won't have to pay until later!"

As a visitor browsed around the garage sale, he noticed two very worn tools leaning against a corner wall. Not being nearly as tempting as the other items, he found it curious that these tools had price tags higher than any other. When he asked the devil why, Satan just laughed and said, "They're so worn because I use them so much, and if they weren't so plain looking, people might see them for what they are." Then pointing to those tools he said, "You see, that one's Doubt, and that one's Discouragement, and those will work when nothing else will."

When reading the Gospel appointed for today, I was reminded of that story, and those two plain looking tools that work so well when nothing else will. That story came to mind because our Gospel this morning is an account of John the Baptist talking to Jesus through his disciples and asking this question, "*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*" (Matthew 11:3). This question came from John the Baptist. The same John who as a baby in his mother's womb leapt for joy at the sound of Mary's voice, who cried out: "*Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matthew 3:2), who declared: "*Behold, the lamb of God*" (John 1:29, 36), who witnessed: "*I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on Him*" (John 1:32). How could John, "*the voice of one crying in the wilderness*" (Mark 1:3), ask the question: "*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*"

For centuries, theologians have wrestled with the fact that John asked that question, and there is still no agreement on the reason why. Some theologians suggest that John asked the question not due to doubt or discouragement, but instead out of concern for his disciples. John was in prison, and would soon give his life because he spoke the truth, and so, they believe he asked this question to the end that the disciples who still remained with him, would hear the answer and be convinced that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and would turn to follow Him.

Other theologians suggest that John, when cast into the kind of first-century prison cell that we can't even begin to imagine, was indeed attacked by those two plain looking tools that work so well when nothing else will. After all, John had prophesied a kingdom of grace, and of judgment. Grace with the declaration: "*Behold, the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,*" and judgment with the warning: "*Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" Remember, when John saw "*many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" (Matthew 3:7). These theologians argue that John witnessed the grace and mercy, but began to wonder, where is the wrath and judgment, and why isn't Jesus, the promised Messiah for whom I was sent to prepare the way, rescuing me from this suffering, and impending death?

We can land safely on either side of the debate about the reason why John asked this question, but no matter what view we hold, there are some things we can't deny: John asked the question, Jesus answered him, and the words of Holy Scripture "*were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope*" (Romans 15:4). So let's turn our attention to Jesus' answer, and the assurance His words provide to all who have been attacked by doubt and discouragement.

Jesus didn't answer John with a simple yes or no. Instead, He said this to John's disciples: "*Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them*" (Matthew 11:4-5). Jesus doesn't simply tell John,

He shows John, through His miraculous works that He is the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Like the blind man who sat in front of the Temple stated: *“Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing”* (John 9:32). Jesus is the promised Messiah who *“will save His people from their sins”* (Matthew 1:21). All of His healing work is evidence of that truth.

As John languishes in prison, our Lord answers his question by reminding him of these historic facts, and it is imperative for us to recognize the significance of this passage in the season of Advent. Like John, we are expectantly waiting for promises to be fulfilled, and there are times when we look at our life, or things that happen in this world, and we feel like we are languishing in prison, because we don't understand or recognize the hand of God at work in these circumstances. Often, based on our finite and limited perspective, we would do so many things differently, wouldn't we? Many of the heroes of our faith felt the same way, and that feeling can sometimes be enough for our enemy to use his tools against us. Abraham, whose is known as the Father of Faith, had doubts, and so he agreed to father a child through his wife's servant Hagar. Moses, who was chosen by God to lead over two million Israelites out of Egyptian bondage in the middle of the night, had doubts, and wondered, even as he stood in front of the burning bush, why God would choose him. Jesus' first disciples walked and talked with the only-begotten Son of God throughout his earthly ministry, but they had their doubts, and so they scattered when a band of soldiers came to arrest Him, and they hid in fear in the upper room after He was crucified.

The devil's tools of doubt and discouragement have been used against the most faithful followers of God, because they work when nothing else will, but in John's example we recognize a way to confront Satan's plain looking tools. Whether John asked this question for himself, for his disciples, or for all of God's people, in the question and the answer we find a way to battle doubt and discouragement. The next time you are attacked by the enemy in this way remember the question that John asked, and take it to the Lord in prayer. In your doubt or discouragement, cry out to God, ask Jesus, *“Are you the one who is to come...”* and wait for God to answer. If you are willing to take such a step of faith, in that moment remember how the Son of God answered John. He did not simply answer with words, but with evidence. The

kind of hard evidence that eliminates reasonable doubt. The evidence Jesus gave to John could be called a “smoking gun.” The fingerprints of God were all over it, and it pointed John, his disciples, and all of us to only one Person, the Person of Jesus Christ.

We are truly blessed to have Jesus’ answer to John to comfort us in times of doubt or discouragement, but remember, the greatest answer lies not in the words or even the evidence. The greatest answer to doubt or discouragement is found in the Person who is revealed by the words and the evidence, the Person of Jesus Christ. As we expectantly wait for God’s promises to be fulfilled in our life, we may not always know or understand God’s plan, but we know that we can trust Him, for through His Son He has manifested His immeasurable love for us. In times of doubt or discouragement, rest in the truth of His love for you, be patient, be confident that God is at work in your life doing better things for you than you could ever ask or imagine. And as we meet at His table, as we partake of the Body and Blood of our Savior by faith with thanksgiving, as we receive God into our body, be assured that the enemy’s tools have no power over us, *“because greater is He that is living in you, than he that is in the world”* (1 John 4:4).