

Who or What Are You Looking for?  
Sermon for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
Sermon Text: Matthew 11:2-11



*Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples<sup>3</sup> and said to Him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"<sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."<sup>7</sup> As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup>What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. <sup>9</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."<sup>11</sup> Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."*

In Sunday school, Peter learned that God answers prayers. Not long after that, Peter was able to test if prayer worked. Peter's dachshund was sick, very sick. The dog had a tumor and the veterinarian said that the operation was very expensive and that the outcome was uncertain. Peter's mother didn't want to deal with the risk of putting the dog under the knife, especially if it wasn't certain whether it would even help. And then Peter thought about his Sunday school teacher and about his grandfather's popular sentence: "Now the only thing that helps is prayer!" So Peter prayed with his whole heart. When the dachshund wasn't getting better, Peter thought that perhaps he hadn't prayed properly. So he went back to Sunday school and asked his teacher to show him how to properly pray. At the same time, he asked the Sunday school teacher to also pray for his dog. The teacher patiently explained to Peter that he had done nothing wrong when he had prayed. She and the whole class prayed for Peter's dog too. What stuck with Peter, however, was the teacher's explanation. She told him and the whole class that God answers every prayer, but sometimes not in the way we want or think. She added that God still loves us even if He doesn't answer our prayers in the way we want Him to. So, Peter went home thinking this all over. If it isn't certain that his beloved dog will get better, why then should he even pray? And is that even true about God if we can see so little of what He does? Peter's concern is well-known to us. It is perhaps even the question that people ask the most. Former German Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, said this in an interview: "A God who allowed Auschwitz to happen no longer needs to be prayed to." People who stand on the border between belief and disbelief, very often ask the following question: "How does faith work and what benefits does it actually give me to believe in God?"

Interestingly, this question also concerns the holy people of God. John is the last prophet of the Old Testament and even he grappled with this question. But let's see how it came about. Already before his birth, it was clear to the parents of John that he was chosen for a special purpose. His parents prepared him for this special purpose through studying the Bible and visiting the Temple. But ultimately all of this was not enough for him. He sought God in the solitude of the desert. He fed himself with what he found there and lived off of locusts and wild honey. He had been there for a long time because even the clothes he wandered around in came from the desert – a coarse garment of camel's hair. During this time, John realized that he was to prepare the way for the Messiah. It bothered him that people were so far away from this Messiah by disregarding God's law. It above all bothered him that they outwardly kept all the customs while in secret, they did anything that they wanted. Deep in his heart, he longed to bring these things back to order. So he proclaimed that the people should repent and turn from their evil ways. "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees!" he cried out (Matt. 3:10a). In other words, they are at the brink of their final judgment. John's message brought fruit. People from all levels of society came to hear his message which struck their hearts and they realized that they were a great distance from God's will. At the height of his preaching career was the big moment when Jesus finally came. But not as John had expected it. According to John, Jesus was finally supposed to clean up and straighten out all the things that were wrong in the world. But Jesus placed Himself under the baptism of sinners, just like everyone else! However, what stuck with John were the

clear words of the living God: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:17) For John, these words were a confirmation of everything of what he had done before – the many hours of preparation at the feet of his father, his time in the desert and all the preaching there. When he heard these words from heaven, all doubt drained away and he knew: now the One has come that everyone had waited so long for. And yet everything happened differently than John had expected. The voice disappeared again. Jesus didn't eliminate all the injustice in the world right away. The conditions in Herod's royal house were dismal and John denounced them. Because of this, he was thrown into a cold prison and there, all the doubts came back. Somehow, the injustice still seemed to occupy a large space in John's life and in the world as a whole. John thought similarly to Peter from my earlier example and like former Chancellor Schmidt: "Is all of this even true? Is Jesus truly God among us? And if so, then why does He do nothing?" At some point, John sent a message from prison to tell Jesus exactly that: "Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?" The answer that Jesus gives is a direct quote from the Old Testament and states: "the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear... and blessed is the one who is not offended by me." The answer that Jesus gives John is not "just" a quote from the Old Testament. Jesus didn't tell him anything new. John should just open his eyes and ears so that he can again see what was already prophesied in the Old Testament. However, Jesus goes on to explain that God's work in this world is truly beyond all human understanding. By means of John's mission itself, this distinction becomes clear because the people who searched for John in the desert, also expected something other than the desert preacher dressed in camel's hair. Jesus asks: "What [or whom] did you go out into the wilderness to see?" Someone who fascinated you? Someone to admire? A rich man? Perhaps a prophet? And then Jesus explains further. John was much more than a prophet. He was the one chosen to prepare the way for God. The greatest of all mankind and then Jesus continues: "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." With this, Jesus not only explains how John is different but also how God's message is different in general. Everything that John did through the preaching of repentance was right. Yet John didn't even have a clue about the actual kingdom of God because, as Jesus told Nicodemus, we must "be born again." Jesus sends doubting John nothing more than a Bible quote. He seems to understand that doubt is part of being human, even to one whom Jesus just described as being the greatest of all people. God doesn't present Himself to us with support, clear evidence, or reassurance. We must endure the doubt. But God is stronger, God will prevail. But whoever waits for the unjust to be destroyed with the stroke of an axe, waits in vain. The Jewish community is still waiting for such a Messiah to prevail and who will remove all the injustice. Jesus urges John to see what he has already seen. He should just look at it with different eyes, with the eyes of faith. Therefore, He says: God's kingdom is already here! It's just different from what you imagine! Not that the axe fells the tree with one blow, but quietly and unobtrusively. The blind will be given sight, the lepers can understand what it means to be clean, those who mourn can understand that there is someone who is stronger than death. But not all will understand what this means. When Jesus says: "Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me", he seems to be expecting that His work will not be visible to all eyes. Jesus therefore wants to invite us as an Advent community to open our ears and eyes. What do we see? What do we expect from Jesus? If we expect Jesus to solve all the world's problems right away, then we are out of place. The Advent question that lies at the center of this is not what we expect but Whom do we expect? And the burning question for us in this Advent community is this: "Who is the One who is to come?" He who should come is not just the one who solves all the problems... And if He did that, would we then believe in Him? A God that we could use would not be a God, but just an extension of our own wishful thinking. God comes and through Jesus, God's kingdom has dawned upon this world. John remains convinced of this. But when this Jesus comes, it is at the risk of being crushed Himself, so that even His friends lose hope. They undoubtedly asked themselves on the day of His crucifixion: "Is this the axe that is laid to the root of the trees which will destroy evil?" And yet they later recognized, precisely through the cross, the steady pulse of God who loves His people. He doesn't strike to destroy the wicked, because that would be the downfall of us all. No, He quietly makes His way to the wretched. He doesn't leave people by themselves, though we deserve it, but He wins us back for Himself by sacrificing Himself for us. That is admittedly a strange way to save people. Did John the Baptist realize that this is God's love language? Do we realize that this is God's love language? Jesus' wish and request for all of us is that our eyes and ears are opened this Advent season. Amen.