

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 11, 2022

Despair is Reasonable

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christians have a tendency to try to keep things “nice” or “polite” when it comes to the journey of faith and life. We often shy away from circumstances, people, and even thoughts that make us feel uncomfortable. And we generally do our best to avoid those things that might challenge our faith or at least put it in some jeopardy. These tendencies are rather unfortunate since it suggests to the world that we can't handle the broken messiness that reality and life often involve.

Many of us seem to have this idea in our heads of what a Christian ought to look like, talk like, and act like. But this veneer of respectability is easy to see through and we can come across as naïve or inauthentic. And unfortunately, these tendencies come out in full force this time of year. We seem to feel as though we have to project a certain image of ourselves at Christmastime even more so than the rest of the year. The tree has to be just right, the house spick and span, and the Christmas card we send out has to project success and happiness at all costs. What a lot of pressure! What a lot of nonsense too!

But it's not just at Christmastime is it? We fall into the trap of inauthenticity all year round. We have become adept at not allowing our truest selves out into the light of day. We seem to have this idea that we're not allowed to have doubts, we're not allowed to express fear or anxiety, we're not allowed to admit when we're feeling hopeless or despairing. As if, somehow, daring to admit these things might make us less than others or at least more prone to being judged by others. And when you break that down to the most basic level, it boils down to fear. We're afraid of being judged or rejected or abandoned. And so, we hide under a mask of “everything's all right,” and “I'm okay.”

Our Gospel reading today should bring us up short if we've fallen into those tendencies. Here we find John the Baptizer locked in prison. When Herod Antipas chose to spurn his wife in order to marry his brother's, John, ever the truth-teller, can't help but speak out. His truth-telling lands him in prison with no great hope for release. Despair is a reasonable response to his situation! And not just despair, I think we all hear in his words some doubt too.

Matthew tells us the question burning in John's heart, the question he sends his disciples to have answered: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"¹ Doubt lies at the heart of this question. We could put it another way: "Are you really the Messiah or did I back the wrong horse?"

This question should come as no surprise either. John is in prison and he's seemingly heard little or nothing about what Jesus has been up to. We don't know what sort of Messiah John was expecting, but many Israelites at the time hoped that the Messiah would lead a revolution against the Roman occupiers. Was that John's hope too? Especially as he was sitting in the prison of one of Rome's puppet kings? I can't blame him if it was!

So John sends his question, laden with doubt and even flirting up against despair. And what is Jesus' response? He tells John's disciples, go back and tell the story, tell **my** story. Tell how the blind are made to see, the lame to walk, the dead are raised. Tell how the power of the Messiah is at work in the messiness of life. Share how those who are powerless and despairing are made whole and welcomed into God's kingdom.

I wonder if these stories satisfied John. Did they quiet his doubts? Did they comfort him in his prison cell? We don't get to know that. John's story will end in a grisly and meaningless death at the hands of the wicked and powerful. And yet...John is somehow known as the patron saint of what? Brownie points if you know! John is known as the patron saint of JOY! Can you believe that?

That status is given John because of his in-utero reaction to hearing Mary's voice.² He knew profound joy even in the womb! But his end is not nearly as sweet as his beginning. And it would do Christians well to remember the entirety of John's story. Just as he is the patron saint of Joy, perhaps he should also be remembered as the patron saint of the despairing too.

¹ Matthew 11:3b (All Scripture references from the NRSV)

² Luke 1:41

We need these stories, and the many other stories like it found in both the Old and New Testaments. We need these stories because at times despair is a reasonable response to what's going on in our lives and in the world around us. We may not be locked in prison cells, but we can find ourselves behind bars of different sorts. And we need to acknowledge that fact. We need to learn to admit that we don't have it all together. At times we're John in prison. At times we're Job railing against God. At times we're the Israelites in our own Babylonian captivity.

And when we find ourselves dealing with doubt and despair, John and the others show us where to turn, and how to turn. Turn to Christ. Turn to the Messiah. Even with our doubts and despair. Drop the mask of "it's okay" and turn to the one whose power is active in healing and restoring people. Turn to the one who has promised to be with us wherever we find ourselves...in prison or even the grave. Turn to the one who is the source of life and wholeness. Turn to the one who knows us despite every mask we may cling to.

Did the words of Christ strike joy in John's heart the way Mary's words did some thirty years prior? We don't know. Perhaps they did. Perhaps knowing that God's power was at work in the world was enough. Perhaps John recognized that there was something bigger going on than he could fully comprehend. Perhaps knowing that others were being liberated from different prisons caused him to rejoice. We simply don't know. As much as I would love to have a "happy ever after" end to John's earthly story, we don't get it. And that's the journey of life and faith.

Instead we get a different ending. An ending with Christ on the cross. An ending which finds Christ despairing too. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!"³ We hear the final proof that there is nowhere we can go where Christ does not join us, even into despair, even into death. And yet that's not the true ending, is it? Death and despair do not win the day.

Life overcomes death. Sight overcomes blindness. Health overcomes disease. Wholeness overcomes brokenness. Joy overcomes despair. Christ overcomes our masks. Can we see that? Can we trust that? Can we come to believe, truly believe, that God will love our truest selves? And maybe if we can, we might discover we don't need those masks anymore. Amen.

³ Matthew 27:46