

Advent 3 + December 11, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Matthew 11:2-11
Nancy Raabe, Pastor

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?”

For most people of Jesus’ time, even his disciples who often just did not seem to get it, this question wouldn’t have been surprising. False prophets abounded during Jesus’ time, since the expectation of “the” Messiah was so great. But for John the Baptist to ask this question....? Wouldn’t he be the one person who knew who Jesus really was? After all, we heard him say last week in Matthew 3,

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,
"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'"

But consider John’s situation in today’s reading, and maybe it’s reasonable that even he would have doubts. Because we also know also from last week’s reading that he was expecting the imminent end of the age: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire,” John predicted of the coming Messiah. And so far that hadn’t happened yet. And, being in jail, John of course had yet to experience the liberation from captivity that Isaiah foretold in Chapter 42 when he prophesied that the Savior would come as

a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

For there John sat, in prison, in darkness.

John didn't exactly accuse Jesus of being a false prophet, but the question must have been in the back of his mind. After all, Jesus frequently cautioned his followers against false prophets" "Beware of the false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves," Jesus says Matthew 7:15, and in Matthew 24:5 he gets more specific: "For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah!' and they will lead many astray."

Every age has had its share of false prophets, both people who predicted the world would end in terrifying ways and others who really are wolves in sheep's clothing. Among the latter are exponents of the "prosperity gospel," who claim that the main thing God wants for us is to be rich.

Have these people READ the Bible, we might ask? This is an indicator. How else can we identify false prophets? We can ask, what is the substance of the message? If it is not Jesus Christ and him crucified [Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified"], that tells us a lot. Also, where does the message leave us? Does it free us from our captivity to sin, death, and the devil, or does it bind us to that even further—such as would be the case if you staked your life on getting rich and on that alone? And where does the message ultimately lead us? To follow Christ or to pursue some other goal that no connection to the gospel of Christ?

But John doesn't have to go through any of that discernment, because Jesus tells John's messengers exactly how John can be certain Jesus is the Messiah: Look around!, Jesus tells them. See what is already happening! The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them—a summation of the entire gospel!

But it isn't just that people are brought back to health. Rather, everyone and everything in the kingdom of God is being restored so that all interactions and relationships can take place

according to God's original purposes. We are released from the prisons of illness and the destructive systems of society, so that we can live in the fullness of who God created us to be as individuals and as the church—the body of Christ on earth.

To many of us, however, movement toward this reconciliation of all things in Christ is slow in coming. In fact, it sometimes seems that we sometimes take two steps back before we can take one forward. Our second reading today from James exhorts us to be patient. It also reminds us that patience is not a passive condition but one in which faith is active as we strengthen our hearts, knowing in the confidence of hope that kingdom of God is near.

If you want to make that state of patient waiting really interesting, consider confronting those wolves in sheep's clothing who stumble across our path. Challenge them to speak the truth; if they can't, then their failure to do so will be a means of exposing what they really are. If you dare, you could take as your model a colorful story in Acts 13. On their travels, Barnabas and Paul find themselves face to face with a false prophet, a magician named Bar-Jesus, who was trying to turn a Roman citizen away from the faith. Acts tells us that Paul, "filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?"

But we know we don't have to don't have to "wait for another." Indeed, we need not "wait" at all. Jesus is calling us to be partners in restoring his creation, we, the extended family of Atonement Lutheran Church. What can we do?

In this reading, James gives us one great idea: Stop grumbling against one another. Complaining about someone is a sin of pride because in so doing we position ourselves as superior to them. And we know what happens to those who judge—they find themselves under judgment.

What happens when we are freed from needing to prove ourselves superior to others? As we experience God's grace in the forgiveness of our old ways of being, new forms of community become possible. Friendships take root and blossom that would have been choked off; family ties are strengthened instead of suffocated. Dare we imagine what life would then look like? We don't have to imagine—Isaiah has already told us!

¹The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

Thanks be to God! Amen.