

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Discipleship in Times of Uncertainty

Lesson: Matthew 11:2-11

² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" ⁴ Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." ⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'" ¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Friends, today is the third Sunday of Advent. The third candle we light is called the Candle of Joy. Advent is a season of waiting, and a season of preparation. We wait for the Lord who will come again, and at the same time, we look to the Lord who has already come among us.

But friends, let me ask you—is waiting always joyful and bright? Waiting can be full of hope and excitement, but it is also often filled with anxiety, doubt, and uncertainty.

(Slide 1) When do you think faith becomes the most difficult in real life? When is faith the hardest?

Of course, big accidents and major crises are difficult. But sometimes, what is just as hard—maybe even harder—is when nothing seems to happen. You pray for your health, but your body still hurts. You pray for your children, but your worries do not go away. You pray for the church, but change feels slow.

In those moments, these thoughts quietly pass through our hearts: "Is God really there?" "If God is there, why is God so quiet?" These questions feel familiar, don't they? We have all asked them. They are questions that come naturally when waiting becomes long.

(Slide 2) John the Baptist stands in the middle of that kind of waiting in today's passage. John is now in prison. This is the same John who once stood boldly in the wilderness, calling people to repent, proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven had come near, and preparing the way for the Messiah.

From birth, John lived a life set apart. He was called by God. He trusted God. He waited for the Messiah and prepared the way. His life looked very different from others. He lived in the wilderness, not in a house. He ate locusts and wild honey, not regular food. He wore clothing that reminded people of the prophet Elijah.

John lived this way because his trust in God was strong. He believed that God would take care of him. When he saw injustice, he did not stay silent. He spoke the truth boldly, even when it was dangerous. John publicly criticized a powerful political leader for immoral behavior. Because of that, he was thrown into prison.

Even though John was strong and faithful, he was still a human being. Prisons at that time were often dark and damp places—underground caves with little light. John was chained, cold, hungry, dirty, and sick. His freedom was completely taken away.

Before prison, many people respected him. They called him a prophet and followed him. But after he was imprisoned, most people forgot him. Only a few disciples remained.

John may have expected God to rescue him soon. He surely prayed. But time passed, and nothing changed. Meanwhile, the ruler who acted unjustly—the one who broke the law—was still living comfortably, enjoying power and wealth.

We have seen this too, haven't we? Good people suffer, while those who do wrong seem to live well. That is exactly how John felt. He felt powerless. He felt shaken.

So John sends his disciples to Jesus with a question: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?" This question is full of doubt—doubt about his faith, his life, and God's calling. In other words, John is asking Jesus, "Are you really the Messiah I waited for? Was everything I believed true?"

We should not judge John for this. Because we, too, are shaken—often even more than he was. Even a great man of faith like John felt doubt and fear when faced with a hopeless situation.

(Slide 3) This is where we must ask: What is discipleship? Discipleship means following Christ. But does following Christ mean never doubting, never being afraid, never being shaken?

I do not think so. John teaches us that discipleship means this: when our faith is shaken, we bring our questions back to Jesus.

John was shaken—but he did not turn away. He turned *toward* Jesus. Many people, when facing hardship, stay stuck in frustration. Or they search

everywhere for solutions—other people, other answers.

But John did not rely on people. He relied on God. He did not stay trapped in his emotions. He went to Jesus with his questions. His question contained doubt, but even his doubt was brought to God. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. It is part of faith seeking direction. That is why, when doubts about our faith arise, we are called to bring those doubts to God—and to keep asking again and again.

Jesus answers John with evidence: “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news is proclaimed to the poor.”

Jesus points to the signs of God’s kingdom already at work.

Friends, discipleship when we are shaken means this: we stop focusing only on our situation and learn to look for what God is doing beyond it.

As I have served here for over five years, my focus in ministry has changed many times. When I first arrived, my goal was simple: to help you read the Bible more. Some of you remember me saying, “Let’s read it together—3, 2, 1!” Then I realized how difficult the Bible felt for many of you. So I tried to explain it more simply, sometimes with humor—even with my imperfect English. Over time, my ministry focus also changed—from multicultural ministry in Southern California to intercultural ministry here.

Recently, at our Charge Conference, as I watched many of you feel anxious, fearful, and shaken, I began asking myself again: Why do I pastor? Why do I preach? What does this church need most right now?

And one answer became clear. Do you know what that answer was? It was to make disciples of Christ. Does that sound too obvious—maybe even disappointing?

It may sound too simple, but as I have served this church, what I have come to believe most deeply is this: what our church needs most is discipleship. A church does not come alive just because more people attend. A church comes alive when disciples of Christ grow. Disciples make the church active. Disciples make the church healthy. This kind of discipleship is what our church truly needs.

You might say, “Pastor, even John the Baptist doubted. Isn’t it natural for everyone to feel afraid and shaken?”

Yes. You are right. But those who follow Christ learn how to return to Jesus. They ask. They seek. They hold on to Christ, even when it is hard.

When we drift away from discipleship, fear traps us in negative thinking. We

stop seeing God's work and God's hope. And, we begin to shift blame onto one another. We criticize, we speak against each other, and we tear each other down. The same thing happens in the church. People keep looking for someone to blame, and eventually, even the pastor finds himself sanding right in the middle of that pain.

But disciples of Christ—even when afraid, anxious, and shaken—still come to Jesus. They bring their doubts honestly before God. They listen for God's voice. And even when God's answer is not what they wanted, they do not let go of Jesus.

Jesus says to John, "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." Jesus knows stumbling moments will come. Discipleship is not about never stumbling. It is about not letting go of Jesus when we do.

What we need, what our church needs, and what we must hold on to in the coming year for the sake of God's kingdom and for the life of our church, is discipleship. Not only our confirmands, not only our youth, but all of us—every one of us—are called to be disciples. This is the way our church lives.

Advent is not only about waiting for Jesus to come. It is a season to examine our faith, to recommit to discipleship, and to notice the small signs of God's kingdom already among us.

The Candle of Joy reminds us: Joy is not a feeling—it is a direction. We are not joyful because our situation is bright. Joy begins to bloom again when we see that Jesus is already at work among us.

Like John, when we are shaken, we bring our questions to Jesus, and we hold on to the small light God gives us. That is the path of discipleship we walk during Advent.

Friends, all of us are shaken at times. Doubts come. Answers feel far away. In those moments, discipleship does not mean becoming someone who is never shaken. It means choosing, again and again, to return to Jesus—to cling to Jesus alone, and to place our hope in him.

When we ask Jesus our questions, when we look again at what he is doing, and when we walk faithfully, holding on to even one small sign, the Candle of Joy will shine brightly in our hearts once more.

May your waiting this Advent be filled with the small lights of Christ. Amen.