

3 Advent – Year A – December 12, 2010
Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:4-9; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11
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“He emerged from the Metro Station [in Washington, D.C.] and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket. By most measures, he was nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a ...baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin.” So opens the article, “Pearls Before Breakfast” that appeared in the *Washington Post*, in April, 2007. The young man had played his violin in the station concourse during the morning rush hour in January. Over a thousand people streamed by, most of them heading for work in the nation’s capital city. A few took an extra step or two to drop coins in the performer’s violin case, or an occasional dollar bill. Most didn’t even notice him, and only a couple of people stopped for more than a few seconds to listen to the music. The shoeshine lady, whose business is in the same concourse, later admitted to being irritated by the noise, and moments away from calling the police.

Based on today’s question sent to Jesus via messenger, we might be wondering what on earth happened to John the Baptist. If he wasn’t stuck in a prison cell, he too might be seriously considering reporting Jesus to the authorities as some kind of con man or worse. John has gone from proclaiming Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29), to asking, “Are you the one?” That’s quite a turnaround. Could it be that John has seen Jesus saving all kinds of people who are imprisoned in one way or another, yet he is stuck in Herod’s dungeons without hope of release? Jesus’ gifts seem to be available for pretty much everyone else, while John is left without joy, comfort or release. Clearly, John’s imprisonment has changed his perspective in a major way. He has had a lot of time in the stinking dank darkness of the palace prison to reflect on Jesus and Jesus’ ministry. And in his isolation, those oh-so-stealthy, thieving fingers of doubt have crept into John’s heart: is Jesus really the Messiah?

Behind John’s question, the passage hints at John’s surprise, disappointment, unfulfilled expectations, or all of the above. The first line of today’s Gospel reading is, “When John heard in prison what the Messiah was *doing*, he sent word by his disciples...” Whatever Jesus was doing, it was not in line with John’s bold proclamations that the one greater than him was coming to baptize with fire, carrying a winnowing fork in his hand to sort out the wheat from the chaff. Nor is Jesus’ ministry in line with the other common expectation about the coming of the Messiah who was expected to crush Israel’s enemies underfoot, and establish a new kingdom with great power and might, and probably a rather large army! John is learning a hard lesson. One that you and I also have to embrace. Despite his prophetic insight, John has to make some serious adjustments in his own expectations, because God is God and we are not. Because God will always surprise, confound, and amaze us, the instant we think we’ve got God all figured out. The one who has prepared the way, must now make his own decision about Jesus – and whether to accept Him as Messiah or not.

As Jesus says of John, “truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” If we were just casual readers of the Scriptures, these words might make us think Jesus is a major power trip, or that He and John had some kind of falling out. Jesus may not have met John’s Messianic expectations, but you and I have the advantage of hindsight. We know that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. So at this point, Jesus is simply speaking the truth of John’s role as a great prophet – one like Elijah, no less – who came to prepare the way of the Lord. He is also speaking of John as the man who hasn’t quite made up his mind about Jesus’ identity. John has a tough decision to make: should he trust that Jesus is Messiah, receive Him in his heart, and become a disciple of the Lord, or not?

Jesus’ response to John is not a direct “yes, I’m the One”. Instead, Jesus refers John to the Scriptures and points to His deeds as a witness to His identity. The proof Jesus offers for John’s consideration that the kingdom of God truly has drawn near is found in the prophet Isaiah. Jesus heals in body, mind and spirit, restoring sight to the blind, and hearing to the deaf. Lepers are cleansed. The dead are raised to new life. The lame now walk, and the poor have good news brought to them. Jesus presents the evidence of His identity

throughout His life and ministry, as well as through His death and resurrection, and simply invites us to make up our own minds. What do we see and hear? Do we see the Light of the world all around us in our everyday lives or are we still walking in darkness? Do we see and hear God working in and through our own lives, and the lives of others? Or are we too busy shopping and stressing; so focused on our own stuff that we fail to listen, and don't even notice the revelation of God's constant presence? Like a test of the senses, Jesus asks the crowd three times what they expected to see in John. Was John what they expected? Probably not. And then there's John himself discovering that his role in this momentous transition in the history of salvation is ending, just as Jesus' purpose is coming into sharper focus. John is moving with us through this period of self-examination, as we all prepare a way in our hearts, and make room to receive the coming of our Lord Jesus.

Back at the Metro station in Washington, D.C. on a chilly January morning, it turns out that the young man playing violin for his fellow sojourners is Joshua Bell, an internationally acclaimed virtuoso whose talents as a concert violinist can command \$1,000 – not per hour, but per minute(!) According to the *Washington Post* article “Three days before he appeared at the Metro station, Bell had filled the house at Boston's Symphony Hall, where even moderately good seats went for \$100.” For his Metro performance, Bell, as usual, made music with his multi-million dollar Stradivarius, and since this was a set up his performance was recorded. The truth of that video is heartbreaking in its clarity. Literally hundreds of people, cocooned in their own little worlds, hurry past the musician without a second glance or even a momentary pause. Only one woman recognizes Bell and later tells reporters that she was thrilled by his performance, despite the unorthodox setting. She drops twenty dollars into his open violin case, bringing the maestro's total take for his 45 minute performance to – well, what do you think Bell's gift was worth to the commuters that morning? Any ideas? It was actually a rather humbling thirty-two dollars and change. Later, Bell laughed saying that the donations came out at about forty dollars an hour, and that he could live with that.

Advent is a time of transition, transformation, and expectant waiting. Jesus offers a blessing to all who take no offense at Him. The pages of history show how offensive the Good news of Jesus Christ can be, especially when the Word challenges the status quo. Countless disciples have suffered death and imprisonment in Jesus' name. Whatever path of salvation humanity may have chosen for itself, God chose the way of the cross. Only an advent, only a transformation and new beginning in Christ can reconcile all humanity, and all of creation to God. Only welcoming Christ's reign in our hearts and lives, can empower *us* to share new hope and joy, revealing more of God's love and peace. Being alert to God's constant presence in the world, and watching for the Light of Christ wherever we are, and in whatever we do, are important aspects of our Advent discipleship.

Since there are only thirteen days to Christmas, we have to ask ourselves, are we feeling the pressure yet? How well are we managing our own expectations, and the expectations of others? Are we keeping our eyes on Christ? Today's lesson shines a light in the darkness of our hectic lives. It reminds us to stay in the present moment, to pay attention to the beauty of God's gifts, to be aware that God's miracles happen all the time, and often when we least expect it. All we really have to do this season, and every day, is to remain faithful to God in Christ Jesus, keep our hearts and minds, eyes and ears open for God's real gifts, and remember that God comes in surprising ways, at unexpected moments.

Amen.