



Faith Beyond Reasonable Doubt

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

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The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called “Gaudete” or “Rejoice” Sunday. Readings from Isaiah and Matthew celebrate God as one who brings healing for people experiencing all sorts of physical limitations.

Isaiah's God promises a blooming wilderness, miraculous healing, and a royal highway that will bring those in exile home. For those who have suffered infirmities, hardships, and loneliness away from home there is indeed a reason to rejoice. Even Matthew's Jesus speaks of his healing ministry with the blind, the deaf, the mute, and the lame. Yet, we get to that after a question John the Baptist asks about Jesus' identity and purpose in life. The passage from the gospel of Matthew has us peering into a prison cell where a broken and despairing John wonders if he had hoped and labored in vain.

Jews have been waiting for God's Messiah and are still waiting. Messianic expectations have been centuries in the making.¹ “Are you the one?” John's question to Jesus is one we can associate with and understand. Have we not asked it ourselves when rebuffed and discouraged?

Joy is not evident behind the bars that hold the fiery Baptizer. Through no fault of his own, John is in chains and in crisis, wondering if he has staked his life on the wrong promise and the wrong person. The Messiah, as far as John can tell, has changed nothing. He was supposed to make the world new. He was supposed to bring justice, fairness, and order to human institutions. He was supposed to finish the costly work John started so boldly in the wilderness — to wield the axe, bring the fire, and renew the world.

John's faith crisis might surprise you. After all, this is John the Baptist we're talking about. John, whose very conception occasioned an angelic visit. John, who leapt in his mother's womb at the first glimpse of a pregnant Mary. A fire and brimstone God, in other words.

John was a boy who grew up with prophetic expectations ringing in his ears. From an early age, he felt the exhilaration and the burden of his calling as “the forerunner.” He knew he was meant to preach repentance to everyone who crossed his path.

So, he took to the wilderness, dressed himself in camel skins, and lived on grasshoppers and wild honey. In due time, he “prepared the way of the Lord,” baptized the Messiah with his own hands, and proclaimed the arrival of God's kingdom to anyone who would listen.

Can you imagine what the people who encountered his ministry at its apex must have said? “What a promising young man! How powerfully God's hand is on him! What do you think he'll

¹ [What is messianic expectation in the Old Testament? - Vatican News](#)

accomplish next?" Well, what he did next landed him in prison. When a faithless king rejected his wife to marry his brother's, John once again honored his vocation of truth-telling and condemned the marriage. Speaking truth to the powerful may be life-endangering.

So, now John wanted to be sure that Jesus was the real deal, and Jesus replied that his healing ministry had benefited people not just physically but by returning them to a productive life he had reintegrated them also economically and socially. Each person that Jesus touched had a whole life, a whole story, a family, hopes, and dreams. Their illness or disability presented challenges for their daily living.

We are like Jesus when we join in the work of making our communities accessible to all people. Jesus prioritized hospitality, inclusivity, and participation; he honored people's dignity.

John must have certainly heard what Jesus was up to. Rumors of the healing rabbi spread easily. Yet, bold and fiery John doubted. He questioned. What happened to his faith? Is it OK for *us* to question God?

Franciscan author and lecturer, Fr. R. Rohr, comments: "The major heresy of the Western churches is that they have largely turned the very meaning of faith into its exact opposite. True faith involves not knowing and even not needing to know, but we made faith demanding to know and insisting that we do know!"

Indeed, already back in the 14th century, the German monk and theologian known as Meister Eckhart would say: "I pray God to rid me of God." Sometimes, in our desire to know God our definitions take over and become crystalized, they become our idols, tools to fight our righteousness fights. Those descriptions actually diminish God.

Most of us grew up in the Church and we are not new to the basics of faith. We went through Sunday School; studied the catechism; got confirmed. We grew physically. Our brains developed and we progressed academically and professionally.

Some of us, it can be said, even matured emotionally. Has our faith caught up with the rest of our reality? What images of God do we still carry from our childhood and don't want to let go? What expectations do we have of Jesus? Is the wrathful, angry God still in the picture for you? Is God still a tyrannical male you need to appease with personal sacrifices? Is "He" a dictator with a set of rules you better not fail to obey lest you get struck with infirmities and heartaches?

I was raised with a fairly precise and comprehensive picture of who God is and how God operates in the world. If anyone had asked me to describe God when I was fifteen, twenty, or thirty years old, I would have rattled off a list of divine attributes as readily as a kindergartner recites the alphabet: "God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. God is Three and God is One. God is holy, perfect, loving, righteous, merciful, just, and sovereign." And all those attributes are still true today, but they need to be re-interpreted. In a way, to know God is to unknow God.

The process of growing in faith means that we need to learn that faith and doubt are not opposites; that beyond all the easy platitudes and pieties of religion, we serve a God who dwells in mystery. If we agree to embark on a journey with this God, we will face periods of bewilderment.

John's disciples asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Responding, Jesus made no claim about himself. He didn't say, "This is what I have done."

Instead, he told them what was happening with the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf and the dead. About himself, he simply said, "Blessed the one who takes no offense at me." It prods listeners to see things from Jesus' vantage point, to ask how Jesus understood God's way of seeing things.

Of John, Jesus asked only that he not be scandalized. He asked that John not cling to his image of a vengeful God, but to be open to the God of the blooming desert, the God who awakens life's buried or dormant potential. This image of God guided Jesus' ministry. Jesus never took credit for healing people; he told them it was their faith, their trusting openness to God, that made them whole. God is present in the messiness of life, ready to create something new.

John questioned Jesus' message and methods. Jesus replied by telling John what he had awakened in people and how they responded. Isaiah talked about the glory and the splendor of the Lord. Jesus saw God's glory shine forth when feeble hands became strong, weak knees ceased trembling and frightened hearts moved beyond fear. The vindication and salvation Jesus offered individuals was a recovery of wholeness, an authentic and effective faith that the hidden seeds of their potential could bloom beyond their wildest imaginings.

This is our growing-up faith: we move from childish things to a more mature faith, from milk to solid food.²

Let us step into a more mature faith, trusting Jesus, trusting in God, and trusting also ourselves and the gifts God has equipped us with. Amen.

² Hebrews 5:12–14; 1 Corinthians 3:1-4