

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2001

“Can You See God’s Kingdom?”
Matthew 11:2-11; Isaiah 35:1-10

On this third Sunday of Advent,
we continue to wait for the coming of God’s Messiah.
As we wait, we wait in the company of John the Baptist,
the one in all of scripture who waits the most eagerly,
watching the horizon of the world,
for that One who is coming to establish, at last,
the kingdom of God.

As strange as he may appear to us at first,
in his camel hair, eating locust and wild honey,
spewing forth wild prophetic oracles about a judgement of fire,
John the Baptist is really a very close companion to us,
he is close to our hearts, and we share his yearnings.
John sees all that is wrong with the world.
He has a keen eye for injustice. He is disgusted by religious hypocrites.
He sees evil for what it is, and he names it.
He knows better than anyone that this world is a broken down place,
beyond our ability to fix.

From John’s point of view,
there is only one option for anyone: Repent of your sins
and prepare yourself for the coming of the Messiah
who is the only one who can save you
the only one who can restore this broken world.

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When John calls for repentance, he especially has his enemies in mind.
John knows who his enemies are -
those self-righteous men who do harm in the name of God’s law
who point to the sins of others
while ignoring the ugly black stains on their own lives.
At the mere sight of their faces, and a fiery rage bubbles up inside of John
like molten lava from the core of John’s heart.

I expect you have a little of John the Baptist in you (and I do, too)
because we know our own enemies...
their bearded faces and evil words leap off the front page at you
first thing in the morning,
you pass them in the hall at work or at school and avert your eyes,
your stomach churning in a knot.

you lie in bed at night, still feeling the pain of her accusation,
or remembering the hurt of his insensitivity.

Your soul cries out for God to fix it all,
punish the evildoer, lift up the righteous
because the world is a mess,
and all you can do is wait for God to do something.

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John expects a political revolution. He wants a war to settle things.
A powerful leader who will recruit an army that will overthrow all evil.
John is no doubt prepared to give his life for the sake of this hoped-for King,
the Messiah in the line of David.
The Kingdom of God is worth any price – and John is ready for the fight.

BUT Jesus is not turning out to be what John expected.
Jesus solution is not so immediate.
So John sends a few friends to ask Jesus,
“Are you the one who is to come...”
because you’re not doing what we thought you’d do;
your not meeting our expectations;
I’m still sitting here in this dark prison and I want out
I want to see the light again
I want the world to be done with evil once and for all.
but it seems that the evil people are still having their way;
things are still a mess.
“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”
We’re tired of waiting, very tired of waiting.

It’s hard to wait for a savior like Jesus.
because live in a world where Big Things get our attention.
Flashy, Shiny, Fast things.
Things measured in Gigahertz, Megabytes, and Miliseconds
Powerful machines,
big even if they’re small enough to fit in your pocket
Big houses on high hills. Tall buildings that scrape the heavens.

It’s hard to wait for a savior like Jesus.
We’d rather wait to get into Ross Park Mall,
because we know that light will turn green soon
and we’ll enter the “pearly gates”
with God-knows how many billions of kilowatts of light,
and how many hundreds of thousands of products
to make our season bright.
When you’ve got a place like the mall to inebriate your soul and numb the pain,
it’s hard to wait for a savior like Jesus.

With Jesus, what we get is a dark, damp stable. A couple of smelly shepherds. A few Dignitaries who slip in on the sly so as not to attract the media.

Jesus brings us little things; little hints of God's big kingdom.

We get one person healed of leprosy here.

A blind man cured over there.

A deaf woman able to hear again.

A dead girl raised – pretty nice –

but of all the carnage of all the worlds wars,

what's one dead girl?

These little hints of the way the world is supposed to be

are never enough to gain momentum and change the tide of history,

but little flames of light here, there, here again,

little candles burning in the darkness.

Jesus says, "*Go and tell John what you hear and see.*"

Look in these little places of grace,

little moments when lives are changed by a small act of compassion

little moments when people live in peace, even for a short while

little moments when you look at your life and give thanks

for God's goodness.

Pay attention, Jesus says, to these little moments,

for in them the kingdom of heaven has come near.

In these little moments of God's heaven on earth,

there is more power than in the greatest modern military

more light that can be generated by a million power plants

a peace deeper than the world can give.

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Don't misunderstand. John was a great prophet.

Jesus stands in opposition to all the same evils that John deploras.

Jesus is indignant over the same injustice.

Jesus weeps over the brokenness and the death all around him.

John was right to remind us

just how far we have wandered from the life-giving way

of the Holy God of heaven and earth.

John was right to point out just how much trouble we're in,

just how deep we have sunk into the mire of our own arrogance and sin.

John was more than a prophet,

he was preparing the way for the kingdom of God

to come into the world.

But now, says Jesus, we must move beyond old ways of seeing and hearing.

We must give up the drive for power, the desire to be great, to be impressive,

and look for the kingdom in the least likely places...

I see the kingdom in the man who is self-employed;

who knows that every hour he gives to the church is a loss of business,
a loss of income,
but he goes every week because he trusts in God's command
to keep Sabbath, and to spend time in fellowship of God's people.

I see the kingdom in the employee who sacrifices advancement
when it means climbing the ladder over the bent backs of co-workers.

I see the kingdom in parents who have tried everything they know how to try,
and wake up the next morning, ready to keep on loving their child,
ready to put one foot in front of the other in their uncertain journey
as a family.

I see the kingdom in the family that recycles everything,
because they believe they were created by God
to be stewards of the earth,
And the family that pinches pennies, and restrains their spending,
so they can give a tenth to the church,
because they believe they have been re-created in Christ
to be stewards of the gospel.

I see the kingdom in the 7-year-old girl
who gathers up a box of her old toys just before Christmas
and takes them down to the local homeless shelter,
because she knows somebody needs them.

I see the kingdom in a congregation that tries to practice waiting
in the midst of a culture of instant-gratification.

I see the kingdom in a community of faith that opens its ears each week
to listen for the Word of God, a word that usually sounds very odd
compared to the familiar sounds of TV and radio.

These are signs of God's kingdom; little lights in the darkness.

They are not anything that will make any kind of dramatic,
large-scale difference in the world.

Only God can turn the tide of evil and sin.

Only God can finally heal the world's diseases.

But these are signs of what is yet to come.

These are signs that God is at work and has not abandoned the world.

These are small fulfillments of the promises of the great prophets,

These little lights keep our hopes alive for
the great day of God's final coming when
the desert shall rejoice and blossom...

...and rejoice with joy and singing...

when we shall at last

...see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God...

when *the weak hands are made strong*

and the feeble knees made firm
when we will say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!"
Here is you God!
...everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
...and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

On that day, these small acts of hope which are barely noticed
will be exalted for all the world to see,
these little proclamations of peace which are barely heard,
will be shouted from rooftops for every ear to hear.

In the meantime, we are content to live and act in hope,
to restrain our own yearnings for greatness, or immediate success,
to wait for the Lord
and to trust in God
believing that Jesus,
who was born in a cattle trough
who associated with the least of the world
and who suffered and died at the hands of the powerful,
this Jesus,
is the One in whom the kingdom of heaven
draws near.

Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at him.