

**Texts: Isaiah 35:1-10, Psalm 146:5-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11**

**Let's imagine the scene from this morning's Gospel: John the Baptist has been thrown into prison. He paces back and forth in his cell, wondering. What is it about this Jesus?**

**Hey, wait a minute. What are we doing reading this passage today? A prison cell? That is not where we want to be on this third Sunday of Advent. Most of us have had the lights up on our houses for at least three weeks. Most of us have put in our on-line gift orders and have been up to Rapid at least once to go shopping. Most of us have the tree up and trimmed and baked a few batches of cookies. Where are Mary and Joseph? Where are the angels and shepherds? We've lit the pink candle this morning, the one that symbolizes "Joy." John the Baptist sitting in prison isn't exactly a joyful thought. Besides, we heard about him last week. Can't we have a Gospel reading that helps get us into the Christmas spirit? What a strange choice.**

**Or is it such a strange choice? Let's think back a bit more about John the Baptist, the one who we heard announce in last week's Gospel that Jesus was coming. John had a front row seat when Jesus appeared on the scene. He was the one who baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. He was the one who claimed that he was not worthy even to carry Jesus' sandals. He was the one who saw the heavens open up and the Spirit of God fly down like a dove. John had expectations for this man Jesus.**

**But now it seems that John was having second thoughts. So he sent some of his own followers to ask the million-dollar question: "Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?"**

**Are you the one? That is the question at the heart of Advent.**

**John had his own concept of what the Messiah, the Chosen One, was supposed to be. The Messiah was supposed to come and re-establish the throne of David, Israel's greatest king. The Messiah was supposed to come and lead the revolution against the Roman occupiers. But we are 11 chapters into Matthew's gospel, and so far, what Jesus was saying and doing didn't seem to John to be very Messiah-ish at all.**

**We understand John's question all too well. Because we ask it, too. The Messiah is supposed to bring peace on earth and goodwill to all. But where is it? We are still waiting. And then the news comes about a fire in an illegally occupied warehouse that kills 36 people. The news comes about yet another suicide bombing, yet another fatal accident involving a drunk driver, yet another friend who has separated from his wife. John had doubts about Jesus and there are times when we do, too. We, too, ask where the Messiah is in this troubled world. And when Jesus doesn't seem to conform to our expectations, well then, we begin to look for a Messiah who will.**

**We begin to look for a Messiah who will bless us with wealth and good fortune if we just believe hard enough.**

**We begin to look for a Messiah who shares *our* views about who belongs and who doesn't belong, in our neighborhood, in our town, and in our country.**

**We begin to look for a Messiah who looks and acts more like Santa Claus, keeping a list of who's naughty and nice, with gifts for those who deserve them and empty stockings for those who don't.**

**We begin to look for a Messiah who helps those who help themselves, a Messiah who will stand up and be strong, a Messiah that we can be proud of.**

**Jesus simply won't confirm what John wishes to hear about the Messiah. He sends John's followers back with what must have seemed like a very odd message: Go and tell John what you see and hear – the blind can see, the lame can walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf can hear, the dead are raised and the poor receive good news.**

**Jesus' message to John is a vision from the prophet Isaiah. A vision of a time when everything will be changed, when God's glory will shine in the wilderness. A vision of a time when water will flow and flowers will bloom, when the desert will become a swamp, when everyone will be restored to wholeness. We are 11 chapters into Matthew's gospel and the vision is clear. Jesus has preached the Sermon on the Mount, bringing good news to everyone who heard him. He has assured the poor in spirit, and those who mourn and those who are pure in heart, and those who are meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness that they are blessed. He has given them words to pray with, teaching them to call God "our Father." He has traveled all around the countryside, healing blind people and paralyzed people and lepers. He has cast out demons; he has brought a young girl back to life after everyone thought she was dead.**

**If Jesus were not the Messiah, then we would be back to the status quo, and nothing would have changed. The blind would still be blind and the deaf would still be deaf and the lame would still be lame and the dead would still be dead. Jesus challenges everything about that view. God's work is new creation; God's work is transformation; God's work is miracles and blessing and a whole new life.**

**Why do we read this Gospel passage during Advent? Because Jesus is the fulfillment of John the Baptist's prophecy. Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus is the answer to John's Advent question and to ours – Are you the one? Jesus is the**

**Son of God, doing God's own work, as we read in Psalm 146: setting the prisoners free, opening the eyes of the blind, lifting up those who are bowed down, loving the righteous, watching over the strangers, upholding the orphan and the widow. Jesus is God's answer of "Yes" to everything that cries out "No" in this troubled and hurting world.**

**There is one more crucial link in between us and John the Baptist this morning, and it is this: Jesus sends John's disciples back to him with these instructions: "Go and tell what you hear and see..."**

### **GO and TELL**

**This Christmas story is not just about lights and evergreen trees and ornaments and family gatherings and gift exchanges. This Christmas story is about a God who loved the world so much that he sent his only-begotten Son into it, to be born into a human family and live a human life and die a human death. This Christmas story is about Jesus, a man who was truly human and truly divine, who fulfilled the vision that Isaiah spoke, who made the blind to see and the deaf to hear and the lame to walk and the mute to speak. This Christmas story is of a world that will be completely and utterly transformed.**

**You would not know the story of Jesus if someone had not told you, right? It's a story that has come down to us through centuries of telling and re-telling. It's our story now, and now we are the ones who Jesus commands: Go and tell what you hear and see.**

**What do you see that you were blind to before? Where do you hear God's voice that you couldn't hear before? What words can you speak that you couldn't say before? Where do you find new life being raised from what was surely dead? What is God doing in your life?**

**Here in God's house, we too are preparing for the coming of Jesus. After worship this morning, we will decorate the sanctuary with lights and greenery and put up our Christmon tree. Rehearsals are in full force for the telling of the Christmas story. Next Sunday afternoon our children and youth will tell the story of Jesus' birth by reading the words and by acting them out and by playing music. And we are all going to sing those songs that we love, the songs that tell the story, the songs and words that testify that Jesus IS the Messiah, the Chosen One. And even though the days are getting shorter and darker, we can begin to see the vision that Isaiah saw. We can begin to see the dawn, the light on the horizon, the joy of the world. In this season of Advent, of anticipation and waiting, we know that the Messiah is on the way.**

**And that is certainly good news of great joy.**