

Matthew 11:2 When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

⁴Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

⁷As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written:

*" 'I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'*

¹¹I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Dear Friends in Christ,

The world is a different place with GPS'es. No more writing out maps. Kind of a shame. I always fancied myself a good map drawer, and now it's just another useless talent I have. No more male-female confusion over directions. The GPS has solved all that. And you don't even need an address. Just ask your phone for Chinese restaurants in Des Moines, Iowa, and it will to escort you there. Which is all well and good, until you are at a stop sign on a county road surrounded by corn fields thinking, "This may be Iowa, but this is no Chinese restaurant!" and your phone cheerily announces, "You have arrived at your destination." Don't worry, the technology will improve and soon we won't be able to poke fun at it.

WAITING THROUGH THE UNEXPECTED

I. The Unexpected Lays Us Low

John the Baptist had no confused GPS, but he was wondering how he got where he was. He did not have a smile on his face. He had been sitting in a dungeon for months.

His life had promised something very different. Thirty years earlier, John's birth had been foretold by an angel (Luke 1:13). His actual birth was accompanied by a miracle (1:20, 64). The Holy Spirit declared through a prophet eight days after his birth, "*You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.*" In his 20's, the Spirit of God led John out into the desert where he became a powerful preacher. There was no grime of money-hungriness about him, no stench of self-glorification. He dressed in clothing made of camel's hair, and he ate the locusts and honey of his desert surroundings. He was an earnest preacher who spoke God's truth without apology and the people were hungry for it. The cities emptied of their citizens and poured them into the desert wastelands to seek this magnetic preacher. They all came, the low and humble as well as the high and mighty.

And then came Jesus from Nazareth. When John baptized Jesus, a voice from heaven thundered and something like a dove came out of nowhere and landed on Jesus' shoulder, only something about the dove told John it was more than a dove. "Yes, the kingdom is coming!" thought John. "Soon there will be trumpets and ticker-tape, victory and peace. The kingdom of heaven is near!" he preached.

But now, prison. The reason he was in a prison was specifically because of his preaching. He had confronted his king who had taken his own brother's wife. During John's prison time, Jesus continued teaching and miracle working. More than this, Jesus feasted with the tax collectors and sinners. John, the point man of the new kingdom, rotted in prison.

And it got to him. ***“When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’”*** It didn't make sense. It was like the GPS had malfunctioned. To put it plainly, he had his doubts. He asked, ***“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”***

Ever been there? You did what you were pretty sure God wanted you to do. You sacrificed. You did the work. You put in the time. And the place you ended up didn't look anything like the place you wanted to be. And it didn't look like God himself or the people around you have any appreciation. Doubt rises. Maybe doubt about who Jesus is. Maybe doubt about why God has allowed this to happen. Maybe it is resentment over events and loss.

And maybe you have gone to Jesus in prayer and asked your own version of John's question, ***“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”*** This can't possibly be where we are supposed to be.

It might be shocking to think of God's prophet speaking like this. But here is where our stain-glass imagination of Bible characters gets in the way of reality. When the prophet Elijah had cleansed Israel of idolatry, a heathen queen vowed to kill him. In fear, he ran and asked God to take his life. (1 Kg 19). Moses, frustrated with the stubborn argumentative Israelites, flew off in a rage against them. Another prophet, Jeremiah, prophesied warnings of sin and judgment through three generations. Like John, he did dungeon time. Jeremiah cursed the day of his birth. The Bible shows us that the servants of God are frail like the rest of humanity. Even the big names are only flesh and blood, and they too get to the point of wondering, “What God is doing?” Good to know you are in good company, isn't it?

II. In the Unexpected, Go to Jesus

And so when John's messengers come to Jesus with the question that is equal parts complaint and question, ***“Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.’”***

Now it is easy to miss the point of what Jesus is saying. When Jesus said, ***“The blind receive sight, the lame walk,”*** and so forth, Jesus was quoting our first reading from Isaiah 35. Any man of God, like John, who knew his Bible would have realized what Jesus was saying. Jesus was saying, “Are you wondering about me? Remember your Old Testament. Remember how God had said that when the Savior would come, *‘Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.’*” (35:5-6). Don't just believe me because I say I am the Savior. Look at God's word!

When we have our questions for God, let us do what John did. Let us take our questions to Jesus. This is part of why we come to church services. This is why God's word encourages his people to be part of a Christian congregation. When we listen to God, we stop focusing on ourselves and the way we think things should be. We get oriented to God. We listen to God.

We see a Savior who has loved us enough to die for us, to make payment for our sins. We have a Savior who didn't just muddle through a broken world like us – oh he did that too – but first he gave up his perfect world for us. Here we see a God who has directed history so that you, his child, today, hear his word in this place of worship. Go to Jesus and listen!

But sadly, when people ask the hard questions of God, they often don't like what God says, and so Jesus must add, ***“Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”*** Jesus knows that

many people stumble over him and his ways.

Such a time comes in everyone's life. It might be a prison. It might be an accident. It might be a crime. It might be a disease. And you are tempted to say, "If this is what God wants, then what we have here is a parting of the ways." Jesus warns, "***Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.***" Jesus wants none to fall away. But he knows how we are. We want to *feel* the benefits of following him. We want his ways need to make sense to us. We want his ways to clean up the milk we spill. We want a Christianity that we can look at with a smile and feel the sunshine inside and say, "Yes, it's good to be a Christian." But when we go to the record of God's dealings with his people, the Bible, we see another picture. We see a loving God, yes. But his plan includes, even requires, a John the Baptist in prison, a Mary watching her son crucified. His plan in our world includes, even requires, a teenager spurned for standing up against peer pressure, an elderly person feeling the ravages of time on body and mind.

When Jesus says, "***Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me,***" he admits that he does not look like what human nature wants in a Savior. He is not going to release every falsely imprisoned inmate, he is not going to heal every sick patient, he is not going to enrich every poverty-stricken beggar. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is not measured by the weights and measures of this world. Some—yes, many—of Jesus' followers feel blessed in this life. But some of the greatest in spiritual stature will suffer greatly. With John's disciples, in times of the uncertain and the unexpected, let us go to Jesus. Let us listen to the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the Bible. Listen to the amazing consistency of three dozen writers spanning 1,500 years, and how all of them point to Jesus as the central figure of human history, the Savior of mankind.

III. In the Unexpected, Know that You Belong to Jesus

Those are the main points. First, we can understand John's doubt in unexpected difficulty. Second, let us take our questions to God in prayer and in the Bible.

But if Jesus' words to John seem like cold comfort, if these words to *you* in *your* darkest day seem like cold comfort, then look at Jesus' last words: "***As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: 'What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 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. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet... Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.'***"

When someone is corrected in your presence, you usually think less of that person. That's why it is a taboo in our culture to criticize a parent in front of his children. And so it was that when John's disciples departed, Jesus wanted to tell the crowds around him that while he may have needed to correct John, that was between Jesus and John. And to them, the crowds following Jesus, John was still God's prophet. His personal weakness in no wise diminished his standing as God's prophet.

Jesus appeals with those who had gone out to the desert to see John. Had they gone out to see a poll-watching, flip-flopping politician? No, they had gone to see a godly man with a consistent message and core principles. Had they gone out to John like people run off to Washington DC to curry political and financial favors? No. John was no power or wealth-broker. He was God's messenger, a dealer in truth, not lies. The crowds, in their own hearts, held the conviction that John was a prophet. Jesus here claims John as God's man, in spite of any weakness.

What comfort for each of us! That even in our weaknesses and doubts, when our faith still looks to our Savior and cries out, "Jesus, save me!", God is pleased to call us his children. Our commendation is from a faithful God, from a Savior who lived as one of us, who knows the temptations, and therefore looks at his people in their moments of doubt and invites them, "*Come to me all you who are weary*

and burdened.”

Jesus commends even those who realize their “smallness” in the kingdom of God—the servant left not with ten talents, but with one, who through all his or her striving thinks, “Ahh, but others can do so much, and I can do so little. Surely this is of no use to God.”—To this one Jesus closes with these words, ***“Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John].”*** For God measures the great in his kingdom not by what work one accomplishes, nor how much one suffers, but simply that one has faithfully served and trusted his loving God with whatever God has given.

John had not expected life to take this turn, to sit in captivity. And, sad to say, it is where his life ended weeks later. But through these unexpected turns in his life, waiting to see the coming Savior, John remained Jesus’ precious child through faith. May God so strengthen us through the unexpected turns of our life. Amen.