

Written Copy For: "Holding Fast to His Promises" – Matthew 11:11-12

3rd Sunday in Advent

December 15th, 2019

Text: Matthew 11:11-12

¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

Exegetical Statement

John has been imprisoned by King Herod for doing what he was called by the Lord to do: preach repentance to all of God's people. But when he preached to King Herod Antipas that he had sinned by taking his brother's wife to be his own it landed him in prison. From prison John had heard about Jesus ministry. John expected to see the judgment he foresaw in Jesus: the winnowing fork and the chaff being thrown into the fire, but there had been none of this. So, he sent disciples to ask Jesus if John had got it right when he identified Jesus as the One who was coming to save them. Jesus responds by citing how His ministry is fulfilling what has been prophesied of the suffering servant: blind receiving sight, lame made to walk, lepers cleansed, deaf made to hear, dead being raised, and the spiritually poor being given the Gospel. And then a personal note of encouragement for John: blessed is he who does not lose faith over what he sees and does not see. After John's disciples depart back to him Jesus addresses the crowd about who John really is. They didn't go out into the wilderness to see a man of weak conviction whom the Pharisees and Sadducees could push around. They did not go out to see one of these religious leaders who dress in fancy clothes and care for themselves first and foremost. They went out to see the one who is the Way Preparer in the manner of Elijah. And that's who John is: the one who is to proceed the coming of the Lord's anointed One. John's role is the culmination of all OT prophets who look forward to the coming Messiah and therefore is the greatest of them all. But so great is the one who is a member of the kingdom the Anointed has come to bring that even the least in this kingdom is far greater than John in his role. Yet as great as this kingdom is violent men can forcibly react against it and counter it works in them. Nonetheless all that has been prophesied to happen that John has fulfilled stands as truth. And so will what has been prophesied of Jesus.

Focus Statement:

Just as Christ pointed John to the assurance of His fulfillment of Scripture, He points us to the promises we have in His life, death, and resurrection. Just as He came in His first Advent so too, He will return as He has promised. He will bring with Him our loved ones we miss and we will be given eternity to celebrate in His kingdom which is really here now, yet hidden, but will be consumed reality on the Last Day when He returns

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

At Christmas time we can find the joy we are supposed to be feeling hard to come by. Instead of this being a celebration of God's greatest gift at Christmas it can seem the opposite: a time that emphasizes what and who God has taken away from us. At times this kingdom Christ came to bring can feel more like a kingdom of defeat than victory

What the hearer should do as a result:

Even as we mourn the absence of loved ones at Christmas hold fast to His promise of that glorious reunion on the Last Day. Know that He is leading and guiding all His children to be there on that day, even when it doesn't feel like He is or look like He is.

Subject Sentence: Christ victorious kingdom is hidden but real

Yesterday afternoon I had the great pleasure of presiding over the baptism of the Paxton family during a private ceremony here at Lamb of God. Both Paul and Wendy, along with their teenage daughters Courtney and Leah were welcomed into the family of God. And that is a wonderful and miraculous thing. Now I believe that all four of them already had faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior which they had confessed to me prior to yesterday. But what they received yesterday was sure and certain confirmation that all the promises Christ has to give them from the cross: salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life are theirs. They've been given Christ's victory that He won for all men. Now in an outward sense it may not have looked like anything special happened. Each one of them looked pretty much the same as before, except all four had smiles on their faces, and slightly wet hairdos. But the unseen reality of what has happen spoke of something much greater. In the future when trials and troubles come into their life, the kind that might cause them to question God's love and care for them, they can look back on this day and know for certain that the Father has marked them as His special child. They, as well as you and I in our Baptism have this promise from Jesus in **John 14:16-17** **"¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you."** No matter what happens to them in the future they can know that Christ is with them and His Spirit dwells within them. What a great victory this is for them and for the kingdom of God!

After the baptism I was called to come to Genesys Hospital by Pastor David Hensler. He is an emeritus Pastor at St. Paul in Flint. He does the visitation of the homebound and the sick there, and has filled in her for me several times. He called because His wife Sharon had

been admitted there yesterday. She has been dealing with complications from a hip replacement surgery she had done several months ago. Continued pain after the surgery sent her back to the hospital where doctors discovered a problem with one of the implants. There was also a problem with infection. They were able to correct the implant problem and deal with the infection, and she was sent to Regency Nursing Home for rehab. Several weeks later she returned home. But the infection returned. There were more trips to the hospital and back home. Then it was discovered she had contracted MRSA. They admitted her on Friday. At first things were looking up. But then she took a turn for the worst. Her internal organs began to fail. The doctors told Pastor Hensler that he should gather the family around her to say goodbye. He asked me to come and we did a short service of Commendation for the Dying with two of their adult children gathered around the hospital bed. She was undergoing dialysis and had breathing tubes inserted in her nose and mouth. Unlike the baptism earlier in the day this had all the appearance of defeat. Sharon was fighting to stay alive but appeared to be losing the battle.

I know many of you will understand what Pastor Hensler is going through because you have been there as you watched a loved one slip away. While others are celebrating the holidays with family you are grieving once again the loss of a loved one with whom you enjoyed so many Christmas memories with. They received the same promise at their baptism that the Lord would be with them always. And you wonder why it was He allowed them to slip away despite your heartfelt cries and prayers. And now instead of Christmas being a joyous and happy celebration it often feels like defeat. The kingdom that came to them in baptism, what has happened to it? Why couldn't Jesus stop this from happening? Why didn't He?

In our Gospel Lesson today we see John the Baptist was having similar thoughts as he sits in prison. He was born to be the one who “Prepared the Way” for the Messiah, the One who is to come, the One who would be the Savior and deliverer of His people. Jesus had been revealed to John to be this very deliverer when John baptized Him. John saw the Spirit descend on Jesus, which was the sign that God had given to him. John’s ministry was to prepare hearts and minds for the Messiah’s coming by imploring people to repent of their sins because the kingdom of God was at hand. Part of John’s ministry of preparation was preaching about what would happen to all who did not repent saying. **Matthew 3:10-12** John is preaching that: **“¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”** And now the Promised One was here! The Kingdom of God had come! Yet John was wondering why it didn’t look that way. Why were evil men still allowed to do as they wanted? Why was his ministry cut short? He had been fulfilling his call to preach repentance when he accused King Herod Antipas of sinning by taking his brothers wife as his own. Herod responded by throwing him in prison. Where was the judgment on this kind of evil? If Jesus truly was the righteous judge why hadn’t He done anything about such evil ?

So, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask Him if he was truly the One that was to come. The One who was bringing the reign and rule of God to His people. Perhaps John wondered if he had it wrong. Perhaps they should they be looking for another to come. But Jesus points

John to what the Scriptures foretold the Messiah would do when He came. In quoting the prophetic words from Psalm 146 and Isaiah 61 (**Matthew 11:4-6**) **"4 And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."** Jesus was testifying to John as well as to those assembled that he indeed was the long awaited Messiah, the Savior, the King in the line of David. But His kingdom would be different than what John, his disciples, or even we here today expect. And blessed is the man who does not let what his eyes see, and his heart feels affect his faith in what Jesus declares to be truth.

The Kingdom Jesus brings is a real honest to goodness kingdom where He is truly reigning on earth. It just doesn't always look like it. His reign and rule is cloaked for now, hidden from our eyes at times. The place where He reigns most clearly is in your heart and mine. He came as a conquering king, but not one that would defeat the Romans. He came to defeat sin, death, and the devil in your life and mine. And He won the battle at the place that looks most like defeat in the eyes of the world: on the cross. It is in His suffering and death, where it appears as if the devil had his way with our Savior, where evil men subdued and defeated Him, that He won the greatest victory for all men. Through His suffering and dying He has taken away every claim that the devil could make on you and I. Every bit of evidence by which he could charge before God that we deserved to join him in everlasting torment. Because He gave His life for all men He has stamped "Paid in full" on all the exhibits of our sinfulness. All charges against us have been dropped. In our baptism we have that declaration of "Paid in full" written across our hearts and minds.

That's what flowed through the Baptismal waters to Paul and Wendy, Courtney and Leah. It's what flowed through the waters of your Baptism and mine. We may not have seen it, but that is the reality of what happened. It's Jesus victory given to us. So that no matter what happens in our life, on the Last Day when Jesus returns, He will give to us the crown of victory that is eternal life. It may have just looked like 3 splashes of water across the forehead, but it was and is a miraculous life changing event. A kingdom event. One that means victory no matter how our life ends.

Jesus is the king who was born on Christmas to bring a kingdom. And while He rules in our hearts its not as if He has no control in the rest of the world. It just doesn't always look like it. That was what John the Baptist was struggling with. If Jesus was the Promised One, the King who brings the Kingdom of God, then why is He not reigning and ruling and righting the problems of injustice against God's people? There is a paradox concerning His reign and rule that Jesus addresses in **Matthew 11:12 "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force."**

Violent men are allowed to stand against His kingdom coming. They stood against Jesus Himself and put Him to death. But this only worked right into the hands of the Father and His plan of salvation. Sinful evil men can also stand against the Holy Spirit as He comes in the Gospel Message to their ears. Evil men within the Church are allowed to corrupt the pure Gospel Message that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Scripture tells us that in the last days one the Apostle John calls the Antichrist will stand in the Church and claim to be the voice of God Himself. And yet through all these things Christ is truly reigning. His Spirit is at work protecting faith in your heart and mine through the Word and Sacrament. And He is still at work in the world, controlling and directing all

things even when it looks as if He's lost control. He takes the worst of the plans of evil men and of the devil and makes them work for the good of His will and of His Church, just as He did through His suffering, death, and resurrection.

There is an unseen reality when we consider Jesus kingdom: how it comes to us and how He is ruling here today. He brings His kingdom and works in power for us hidden in the Word and Sacraments. He reigns and rules in the hearts of all believers through His Spirit poured out in Baptism. And He is reigning and ruling even over the unbelieving world in ways that they cannot see or comprehend. There was a powerful yet unseen reality at work in the Paxton's baptism yesterday. There was a powerful yet unseen reality at work in Sharon Hensler's hospital room. Jesus was there as He promised to be. Jesus is at work as He promised to be, to bring healing to Sharon. This healing could very well result in her recovery, and that would be a great victory. But even if He is there instead to take her home to be with Him, that is also a great victory. She receives the ultimate healing where sickness and sorrow and pain can no longer plague her. The same is true for your loved ones who have passed on to be with Jesus. They have left us, but not forever. They join with us as the unseen reality of Jesus kingdom presses in on our Communion Celebration. We gather at the Lord's table with "angels and archangels and all the company of heaven." That company of heaven includes your departed loved ones and mine, now with Christ, who join with us, unseen, yet truly present as the Church of the past, present, and future gathers around His table for this foretaste of the feast to come in His kingdom which has no end.

Christ kingdom is reigning among us. We just can't always see it. But we can hold fast to His promises that He is ruling and reigning in your heart and mine, and in the world around us

by the faith that He gives us in Baptism. May that faith and His words of promise bring you comfort and joy in the midst of the sorrow this Christmas season. Amen.