

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?”

The first is an honest and heartfelt question from a man in prison. John has followed the path laid out for him, to prepare the way for the Messiah. And that path has led him to prison – on the outs with Herod.

That’s Herod Antipas, son of Herod of the Great. Last week’s reading sets the story of God’s salvation in the “time of Herod” which was referring to the Judean King, Herod the Great who ruled from 72 to 4 BCE. While he presided over the birth of Jesus and all the angst and horror that followed that birth, his sons would soon reign and by the time we get to this part of the story – nearly half-way through the Gospel of Matthew – it’s Herod Antipas who has thrown John in prison. Different Herod, same reality of violent oppression, same fear. John’s great crime that put him behind bars and would soon lead to his death? Calling out the king for his lawlessness.

My apologies if you’ve lost the timeline a bit. Here we are in this season of waiting and expectation, looking ahead to the birth of Christ, but we’ve jumped ahead just a bit in the story to a time when Jesus has already grown up, been baptized by his cousin (the anticipated son of last week’s story), and begun to preach, teach, and heal throughout the towns and cities of Judea.

Meanwhile, the prophet of the wilderness, the preparer, the cousin has continued his own teaching which has run afoul of the authorities – you don’t simply call out a king for breaking the law without consequences. It’s the perfect opportunity to reflect on all your life choices – to consider what you’ve done with your life, especially when you wonder if you will ever see the light of day.

Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee, a United Methodist pastor and seminary professor, put it this way,

“In the dim light of [John's] cell,
with execution on the horizon,
hope flickers low.
He does not ask for a miracle.
He asks whether his whole life—his ministry,
message, and risk—meant anything.

I've never been to prison. My brushes with the law have always been much simpler, traffic-related occasions. I visited a prisoner...once. I'm not sure I can truly imagine what John was experiencing in Herod's prison of the first century. But I suspect all of us, whether we've suffered as John has or not, can identify with the sentiment of not knowing if you've made the right choices.

Especially if you seem to have failed completely in what you thought your mission was. In the dim light, hope flickers low. You feel like it's time to rethink everything. And that seems to be the foundation for John's question. He thought Jesus was the Messiah and yet it hasn't gone as he imagined. Perhaps he thought it would be **Jesus** challenging the power of Herod and winning that challenge to create a new kingdom. And so, from the depth of that imprisoned despair comes a cry of fading hope, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

He might be asking two different questions: one, are you the Messiah that is going to set me free from this prison? Or two, is there someone else coming who I was supposed to be proclaiming?

Jesus' answer to the question comes right out of the prophecy of Isaiah... "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?" Jesus returns the messengers to John to tell him what they have seen: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Notably, Jesus didn't repeat Isaiah's words about the prisoners going free.

That's really all we get about John. In just a few chapters, Matthew will tell us how John's life was ended by Herod in prison – told after the fact. We don't hear if John even received this message from Jesus, let alone if it gave him any hope in the time he had left.

Where does that leave us? Where's the hope in the story of a man imprisoned for doing what God asked of him? Do we learn anything from this glimpse into John's prison experience?

We may not be in prison, we may not be suffering in the same way John is, but I know I've asked the same questions of God. Are you really the one? Is this really the way? Do I have it right?

I'd like to say I've heard a big booming voice with a definitive answer, but I haven't. Instead, I've had to lean into Isaiah's question: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?" That's a different answer than what I may have

expected. That's an answer with another question, but it becomes an essential question: do we perceive what God is doing? In the midst of the despair, in the midst of the struggle, in the midst of growing hopelessness, do we perceive the new thing that God **is** doing?

Some days. Maybe not other days. But that's on me, that's not on God.

Isaiah's words came to a people who were living in exile. Maybe it wasn't the same prison that John endured, but it was a prison, nonetheless. The people found themselves in a figurative and literal wilderness – a place far from where they wanted to be. A place that felt like God had abandoned them.

I can't hear these words from Isaiah without thinking of my time in Djibouti – a place that was a literal desert and often felt like a figurative wilderness; a place where God sometimes felt far away, as far as my family on the other side of the globe.

But then there were those glimmers of hope that carried me through: the beautiful white Oleander flowers that bloomed on one of the few living plants I'd see in my day-to-day. Whenever I saw them, I could imagine the effort it was for them to spring forth in that desert and it reassured me that God's love would continue to spring forth in ways that were a bit harder to perceive than they might have been from the comfort of the lush hills of Maryland.

"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?" Maybe it's a challenge we can take seriously in this season of waiting – in this season of searching for hope in the dim places, in the prison cells we're placed in...or that we've chosen.

Not because it's easy. But because perceiving what God is doing gives us the strength to hope; to actively and with purpose, hope for what we know to be true about the birth of Jesus. God is doing a new thing. This might be your 53rd Advent season like me...maybe you've been through more, maybe fewer. But no matter how many times you've waited in what can feel like a prison for Christ to be born again, the promise remains true. The hope is still here.

God is doing a new thing – it began thousands of years ago and continues right here. Right now. Do you perceive it? Amen.