

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Come, Lord Jesus!*
Service Theme: *Come, Lord Jesus, As Messiah!*

Sermon Theme: *Are You the One? (December 11, 2022)*
Matthew 11:2-12

Christmas is a season of great expectations. We have great expectations for how our loved ones will receive the gifts we so thoughtfully picked out for them. Great expectations that our Clark Griswold-esque lights display will wow the neighborhood. Great expectations that our Christmas party will be a smashing success. But a season of great expectations can also be a season of great disappointments! If your loved one opens the gift, with a look that says, “Did you get a gift receipt?” If you plug in the lights and discover they’re all burnt out. If you burn the meal, and drop the tray of Christmas cookies. And when great expectations go unmet, it can lead to doubt.

That’s also true outside of Christmas. If the first week at your new job doesn’t go as you expected, you might be skeptical that you’re in the right field. If the first semester at your dream school felt more like a nightmare, you might question whether you should transfer. If your marriage isn’t the constant joy and warm fuzzy feelings you expected, you might doubt that they’re the right person. If our great expectations aren’t met, great disappointment can lead to great doubts and fears.

That can be true about our faith as well. We see an example of that in today’s sermon text, as John the Baptist asks Jesus, **Are You the One?** As we’ve heard over the last couple weeks, God had called Jesus’ second cousin John to carry out an all-important purpose. He would be the forerunner, the one who would come to prepare the people for the Messiah’s coming. And with his message of repentance, and the baptisms he administered in the Jordan River, John spent his ministry getting people ready for Jesus to begin his Messianic ministry!

That’s why it’s surprising and confusing to read in our sermon text that John sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus, ***“Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”*** Why would he ask that? Wasn’t John hand-picked by God to point people to Jesus as the Messiah? Didn’t he point people to Jesus as ***“The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”***?

Hadn’t John seen the Holy Spirit come down on Jesus like a dove and heard the Father declare, ***“This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased”*** when he’d baptized Jesus? Yup, same guy. So how could John be wrestling with doubt that Jesus was the Messiah?

Some try to explain it away, by claiming that John was merely sending his disciples to Jesus with that question so that they, the disciples, could have their doubts about Jesus erased by Jesus. A teacher enacting a learning exercise for his disciples, but certainly not doubt in John’s heart.

But while it seems surprising that a man who had so firmly and confidently proclaimed the truth that Jesus was the promised Messiah would now doubt that truth, why would we assume John is somehow exempt from doubt?

There’s a couple different things in our sermon text that makes it unsurprising that John might struggle with doubts about Jesus. We’re told, ***“When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask [Jesus], “Are you the one who is to come?”***

First of all, he’s in prison! Many scholars guess that John had been locked away in a deep, dark dungeon in King Herod’s desert fortress Machaerus, for around 8 months. John got on Herod’s bad side when he’d had the guts to call out Herod’s sinful, illegitimate marriage to his brother’s wife.

And as he sat wasting away in that dungeon, knowing he probably wouldn’t make it out alive, doubt must have attacked John’s heart. Shouldn’t the life of the forerunner of the Messiah be filled with power, ease, and glory, not suffering, hardship, and death? Maybe Jesus wasn’t the Messiah after all.

And second, when John’s disciples came with reports about what Jesus had been up to, they didn’t fit John’s expectations. As we heard last Sunday, John had proclaimed the Messiah coming as a righteous, wrathful judge, coming with his ax to chop down every unfruitful tree and toss it into the fire!

But there was a profound lack of axe chopping against fruitless trees like Herod who had imprisoned John. Instead, Jesus was preaching about peace and grace, and healing people of their diseases and ailments. That was hardly what John had been prophesying the Messiah would do. So as doubt and skepticism grew in his heart and mind, John sent his disciples to Jesus with the question, ***“Are you the one?”***

And John's not alone in his doubts. Just think how many Scripture accounts describe moments of weakness and doubt from the great patriarchs, prophets, and kings of Israel—Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Elijah, the list goes on. And when our great expectations for Jesus seemingly go unmet, doubt and skepticism quickly grab ahold of us too.

When hardship strikes—be it a health struggle; the death of a loved one; financial instability; broken relationships; opposition to your faith—we can quickly be filled with doubt. If we assume that followers of Christ should be exempt from struggle, heartbreak, and pain, when hardship hits, we start wondering, “Does God care? Is God all-powerful? Does God even exist?”

Or when Jesus doesn't meet our expectation of the kind of God we want him to be. When we want him to be our “genie in a bottle,” our therapist, our cheerleader, our validator, but instead Jesus' teachings contradict our desires, society's whims, or your friends' opinions, and convicts our preferred lifestyles and worldviews. Or we want Jesus to be the vengeful judge who destroys everyone who disagrees with us or thinks differently than us, but he speaks of grace, mercy, and forgiveness, we can quickly be filled with doubt. Is Christianity really the truth? Is Jesus really good and loving? Does Jesus' teaching jibe with what I think, who I want to be, and who I want him to be?

We've all been there, in those moments of creeping doubt where we wonder about Jesus, “Are you the one?” Maybe you're there right now. If so, understand this: doubts don't equal unbelief. But when we're wrestling with those doubts about God and faith, we have to follow John's lead and take them to Jesus!

Notice how Jesus responds. He doesn't fly into a rage, screaming or belittling John, “Are you kidding me, John, you doubting fool?” Instead, he responds with love and patience, calmly and compassionately answering John's doubts...by pointing to himself.

He tells John's disciples, ***“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”***

That might not sound like much of an answer to our ears. John had already heard all of that! But it wasn't what Jesus was saying as much as how he said it.

Obviously, John knew his Scriptures well, as his message about the Messiah all followed Old Testament prophecy. So when John heard the formula of Jesus' reply, he connected it to a couple other Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. As we heard in the first reading from Isaiah 35, Isaiah prophesied that when the Messiah came, ***“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.”*** Speaking as the voice of the Messiah, Isaiah 61 says, ***“The LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”***

By connecting his preaching and miracles with the preaching and miracles Isaiah prophesied the Messiah would perform, Jesus was reassuring John, “Even if I don't always fit your expectations for the Messiah, I fulfill God's expectations for the Messiah exactly.” In fact, Jesus even goes above and beyond. Isaiah never prophesied that the Messiah would raise the dead! But Jesus did on multiple occasions! By pointing to himself as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, that he was the one who had come to defeat sin and reverse all its consequences; that he was the Messiah, promised since the very first fall into sin, Jesus defeated John's doubts.

And when we hardship, or unmet expectations lead us to doubt Jesus, we also need to take our doubts, questions, and fears to Jesus, and let him answer them through his powerful Word!

Christian author and apologist C.S. Lewis once wrote that while many people think of Jesus as a great role model, exemplary teacher, or influential religious leader, there's really only three ways we can regard Jesus: Because he claims to be the Messiah, Jesus can only be a Lunatic, a Liar, or the Lord. If he claims to be God, and he's not, but he really thinks he is, he's a lunatic. If he claims to be God, and he's not, and he knows he's not, he's a liar. And if he's either Lunatic or Liar, should we think of him as a great role model and teacher? But if he claims to be God, and he really is, then we can't treat him as anything but the Lord, the Messiah, the God of all! And that changes everything!

To determine which of the three Jesus is, we have to answer our doubts and questions by what we “see and hear” about Jesus-- in his Word. See him as he performs miracles that exhibit his divine power, and validate his powerful, heart transforming message that he is the Messiah, the Savior. Hear the prophecies about the Messiah, and see them fulfilled by Jesus millennia after they were spoken. And not just obvious, easily-fulfilled predictions, but

minute details that no one could predict—born of a Virgin; born and raised in humble no-name towns like Bethlehem and Nazareth. Hear King David in Psalm 22 perfectly describe the horror of Jesus’ crucifixion thousands of years before crucifixion had been invented. Hear and see the offspring of the woman crush Satan’s head, while his heel was struck on the cross, over 2 millennia after God first promised it to Adam and Eve.

Bring your questions and doubts to Jesus. Without preconceived notions, simply let him defend himself as you hear and take in his Word, his actions, his promises. Let the Holy Spirit work through the Gospel to erase your doubts, and fill you with certainty that Jesus is no lunatic, or liar. He is the Lord, the Messiah, your Savior.

When you know that truth, it completely changes everything in your life. If Jesus is your Lord and Messiah, then hardship ceases to be an occasion for doubt, and becomes an opportunity to rely on him, and trust that even this for your eternal good. If Jesus is your Lord and Messiah, then even when he doesn’t perfectly fit your expectations of what you’d like him to be and do, the only thing that matters is that he’s fulfilling God’s expectations of what he needs to be in order to save us eternally! That’s more than enough to confidently trust in him.

To defend John against any accusations that this moment of doubt made him some untrustworthy, vacillating messenger, Jesus reminds them that John was no *“reed swayed by the wind,”* or a *“man dressed in fine clothes”* who lives in the king’s palaces for saying whatever the king wants to hear. Instead, John lived in the king’s dungeon because he stood firm on God’s truth! As the prophet uniquely positioned and called as the “forerunner of the

Messiah,” Jesus could say about John, *“Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.”* John’s questions, his doubts, his need for reassurance from Jesus doesn’t make him an unqualified messenger. Rather, it made him even more reliable. Because in his time of human doubt and weakness, he looked to Jesus to answer his doubts.

Which brings us to the final question: Are you the one? Are you the one to follow in John’s footsteps and proclaim the good news of Christ to the crowds around you? You are! As Jesus says, *“Whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”* You are greater than John the Baptist, as a gospel messenger!

How so? John’s purpose was to prepare people for Jesus, then hand things off to Jesus. Basically, to work himself out of a job. And John never left that prison alive, meaning he never saw Jesus’ ministry, or the plan of salvation completed at the cross and empty tomb with his own eyes. But you have! As Jesus later told his disciples, *“Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. Many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”*

Through the full revelation of Scripture, you’ve seen and heard things about Jesus and the salvation he won for us that people like Abraham, David, and John never got to see. You are the ones. Go, tell others what you’ve seen and heard. Tell them how Jesus has saved you, and them. Tell them what Jesus means to you, and how faith in Jesus, the Messiah, changes everything! Take your doubts and your questions, and bring them to the one who exceeds even our greatest expectations—Jesus, our Messiah!