

**Yr. A, Advent 3**  
**December 15, 2019**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1533 Words**

**Lessons: Isaiah 35:1-10**  
**Canticle 15 (Luke 1:46-55)**  
**James 5:7-10**  
**Matthew 11:2-11**

John was in prison. Although his dad was a priest and he, himself, was very popular among the people, none of that was helping *at all*. John's best days were behind him, and he probably knew it.

Herod Antipas, the tyrant of Galilee who locked up John the Baptist, (he) was just as vile as his father, Herod the Great. *Unlike* his father, Herod Antipas had *everything* handed to him. He was splendidly entitled, lazy, lustful, and deceitful. Herod Antipas believed *only* in himself. Everyone else had to fall in line behind him.

When you are suffering unjustly for speaking the truth to power—like John the Baptist was—you want someone more powerful to step in and help. You want *God* to do something about it! The bible is full of people calling out...crying out...even complaining to God, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall my enemy triumph over me?” (Psalm 13:1, 2b)

And this is where John was...in prison...the very cousin of Jesus...the one who announced (just last week) “Jesus is more powerful than I am.” John imagined Jesus with “a winnowing fork in his hand”—a righteous Messiah who would use his power to gather up those who were good (the wheat) and *also* burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Just so you know, Herod Antipas was definitely the chaff.

John was expecting *more* from Jesus. John was *at least* expecting something *different* from Jesus. Sometimes we do, too. And there is no prison *more secure* than the prison of our own expectations. We are prisoners of our poorly crafted assumptions—about God...about ourselves...and about other people.

Advent comes to us as a season of questions, and not so many easy answers. Advent arrives with questions which challenge our poorly crafted assumptions and expectations.

The first Sunday of Advent we heard Jesus describing a dismal future, only to be asked this question by his disciples—“When? When will all this take place?”

And Jesus does not have an answer, only a warning. “I don't know,” he said. “You should just be prepared.”

That is so unsatisfying. We want answers, not warnings. Jesus challenges our assumptions about him, and it is so easy to be surprised...and maybe even disappointed if we are imprisoned by our assumptions.

In the second week of Advent we heard John crying out in the Judean wilderness, and we naturally ask the question, “Where?”

We *know* where power is to be found—in royal palaces and in capital cities, in courts and in temples. And *yet* Jesus is appearing in the muddy, little Jordan River next to the wild man who eats locusts...and surrounded by huge crowds of unclean, sinful people.

That is so unsatisfying, and Jesus knows it. “What did you *expect* to see?” he asks, “a reed shaken by the wind or someone dressed in soft robes?” We want to see a *sure thing*, at least some of the trappings of power and prestige. Once again, Jesus challenges our assumptions about him, and it is so easy to be surprised...and even disappointed.

We are often prisoners of our own poorly crafted assumptions—about God...about ourselves...and about other people. There *is no* prison more secure than the prison of our own expectations. And it so easy for us to identify with John the Baptist when things are not right in our world.

“Are you *the one*...?” we naturally ask of Jesus, “or should we wait for someone else?”

And so, the question for this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent is “How? How can we *know* if Jesus is the one who is to come?”

It seems as if the answer is—we can’t. We cannot know—if it *could be known* then John the Baptist *certainly would have known*. The cousin of Jesus Christ, the greatest prophet born of a woman—*he*, of all people, would have known.

But he didn’t. He had to listen to other people. He had to trust *more* than his own assumptions. He had to believe in *more* than his own expectations.

That is so unsatisfying, and Jesus knows it. We want certainty, and we want it instantly. We want answers from our Messiah, not warnings. We want power from our Messiah, not humility. We want solutions from our Messiah, not assurances.

Unfortunately, the Season of Advent reminds us that we must follow the example of John the Baptist—family member and close, personal friend of Jesus. We have to follow the example of John the Baptist, the greatest prophet ever, according to Jesus.

*We* have to listen to the voices of other people, like John did. *We* have to trust the stories of other people, like John did. We have to trust *more* than our own assumptions. We have to believe in *more* than our own expectations. We have to free ourselves from those prisons, and open our minds and our hearts to the love of God revealed through Jesus.

Look, Mary had to trust the voice of the angel, Gabriel, more than her own assumptions about being young, unmarried, and pregnant. Mary had to believe in the story of the messenger, Gabriel, more than she believed her own expectations of how the God of Israel might *reasonably* work in the world. And then, young, pregnant Mary traveled all the way down to the Judean hill country to see her cousin, Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist.

And Elizabeth had to trust the voice of Mary more than her own assumptions about how God shows mercy to the meek, and scatters the proud. Elizabeth had to believe in the story of Mary more than she believed her own expectations of how the lowly would be lifted up and how the hungry would be fed.

About four months ago I decided to trust the voice a prophet, Malachi, more than my own assumptions. I believed in the story of this messenger, Malachi, more than my own expectations. His story was one of hope against all odds. His message is one of healing in the midst of unimaginable *dis*-ease and brokenness. I don’t know...how to *begin*...to make a difference in a horrendous situation like Haiti is up against.

And then I realized *I cannot know*. I have to listen to the voices of other people whom I trust more than my own assumptions. I have to listen to the stories of people whom I trust more than my own expectations and doubts.

Malachi is the name of the biblical prophet. *Malachi* is the name of a medical student from Cange, Haiti whose message of hope I am willing to believe. He is someone whose hope about healing I am willing to trust.

And the story Malachi shared with me is the story of a young woman with incredible potential as a nurse and *without any ability whatsoever* to pay for nursing school. I shared this story with our Outreach Advocates here at St. Peter's. They also trusted and believed. And so—on your behalf—we made a new commitment in the longstanding relationship our parish (and our diocese) have had with the people of Cangé.

Well, this is the message I received on Thursday.

“Good morning Father Furman,  
My name is Rodengslie Gedeon. It is an honor for me to write you today to thank the people of your Church. It's my second week at nursing school; it is like a *dream...come...true!*

...I thank God for blessing me always *and* the people of St. Peter's for the opportunity you have given me to go to University.

I am the oldest in my family. I want to succeed and be there for my younger brothers. I will do well...and I want to say a big thank you again.”

The question for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent is “How? How can we trust if Jesus is the one?”

We will trust *only* if we are willing to listen to the voices and stories of other people, which open our minds and hearts to believe more than our own assumptions. This is the kind of trust that gives us the strength and courage to keep on being the *living* members of Christ's Body, enacting the healing and hope of God's love with our hearts and hands and voices.

Dear people of God, we are called to listen, and then trust, and then proclaim *more* than our poorly crafted assumptions and expectations. We are called, like the Blessed Virgin Mary, to open ourselves to the stirring power of God's Holy Spirit.

*When we do this*, then our souls—like Mary's—will be able to proclaim the greatness of the Lord. *When we do this*, then our Spirits—like Mary's Spirit—will be able to rejoice in God our savior.

This kind of proclamation and rejoicing is the very thing that our *dis*-eased and broken world so desperately needs to hear and see today, as it did back then.

So, go! Go and tell what you hear and see of the power of God's love which is still stirring up and bringing forth healing and hope in Jesus' name.

Amen.