

Feeling the Wait: God's Way

Trinity CRC, December 22, 2019 AM
Advent Series—*Feeling the Wait*

Matthew 11:1-19

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Friends in our Lord Jesus,

A couple comes to talk about their marriage struggles. I hear the disappointment in the voices. "I just didn't think she'd ever do that to me." "I thought he was always going to be my knight in shining armour." "This is not what I expected."

That sort of thing happens with people frustrated in their job. "I expected that I'd get a promotion to the new position they opened up; I can't believe they hired someone from outside to fill it."

There are many reasons for disappointment in life: children who don't respect our wishes, teachers that don't understand us, students who constantly disrupt a class, finances that get tighter sooner than we expected, praying for a child but not getting pregnant, making a move that didn't work out as you thought it would, friends who you love that really hurt you, getting sick when you're young or frail in old age and feeling like God has forgotten you.

Sometimes it feels like Jesus isn't getting it right in our lives. We know that God can instantly do anything for us. He is able to make our lives sweet. So when sour stuff happens, we have questions, disappointments and frustrations.

John's Problem

John the Baptist in today's Bible reading suffers from confusion and disappointment to be sure. Think about this guy with me for a minute. He's a fascinating character. Girls and boys, John dressed in camel's hair and ate grasshoppers! We probably won't do that, but we may be surprised to find that we have more in common with him than we think.

John, as you know from our reading, is in prison. Back in Matthew 4:12, we are already told that John has been jailed and, by Matthew 14, it all comes to a shocking conclusion. But he's in prison simply for doing what God assigned him to do. However, King Herod didn't like it.

John was considered an annoyance to King Herod because John was constantly telling people to repent. John started condemning Herod for marrying his brother's ex-wife. Matthew 14:4&5 reads,

Mt 14:4 for John had been saying to Herod: "It is not lawful for you to have her." 5 Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet.

Herod could have killed John. Kings had done so for less!

But Herod was a politician. John was very popular. Herod saw that the Jewish people were fond of John so he didn't want to kill John and risk getting the people riled up and starting a rebellion. You see, even though Herod is called a king, he is really just a ruler over the Jews on behalf of the real king who is Caesar the Emperor of Rome. Rome wanted these little kings to keep their people under control and to keep them from rebelling. Moreover, John keeps preaching about a new kingdom and a new king, which could have been a threat to Herod. So Herod figures just keep John away from the people so he can't preach anymore and then his popularity will die away slowly.

So, there sits John in prison. He's probably thinking that Jesus should hurry up and get the Kingdom of God going. Get rid of Herod and get on with God's agenda! John has a high view of God's power and strength!

The problem is that John also has certain expectations of how God should establish his kingdom. He came into the role of a forerunner of Jesus by divine appointment. His parents were told about God's plan for him. I'm sure the Lord also worked in John's heart through the years to prepare him for his task and to give him a passion for it. But I don't think John ever pictured himself being put into prison for following God's lead. Yet that's where we find him. It's from prison that he starts to reflect on what Jesus is doing. "This is not how I pictured my life unfolding!" he may have thought. But more than that, this is not how he pictured the kingdom of God. John expects Jesus to come and destroy Rome—Caesar, Herod and all that the Roman power and the secular Greek culture impose on the Jews.

If you look at your disappointment with others, with life, or even with Jesus, you'll probably discover that our expectations set us up for disappointment. We expect our husband, wife, children, friends, boss or coworker, teacher, classmate or others to be something they'll never be. We might expect that life will pan out for us the way we planned, and we think God should answer our prayers according to our will. None of those expectations may actually be voiced or spoken out loud but still they are in our mind and heart. So they lead to us to disappointment with Jesus.

The Kingdom's Agenda

Dear friends, John lacked understanding of how the Messiah would usher in the Kingdom of God. Most Jews of his day shared his view of a messiah being someone who would wipe out Rome. John was looking forward to Jesus beating back opponents of God's people. Knock Herod from his throne, become king in his place, and then maybe Jesus could even get his cousin—John himself—out of prison while he is at it. Our chapter begins with reminding us that Jesus is simply going through Galilee preaching the gospel and living it. John expected something "faster, bigger, stronger and more impressive."

Richard Holdeman writes, “John’s expectations were not being met and that blinded him to the amazing things that Jesus was, in fact, doing – incredible miracles that validated His gospel message. Jesus’ answer (to John’s question, ‘Are you the Messiah?’) was a reference to Isaiah 35:5-6 and Isaiah 61:1. ‘Go and tell John the things which you hear and see (said Jesus in Matthew 11:4-5): ‘The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.’ Jesus had come to begin unwinding the curse. He was reversing the destruction of the Fall. He was beginning the process of renewing all things.”

You see, John got his own mission right. He had to point people to Jesus as the one who would bring in the kingdom of God. But John misread Jesus’ mission. He misread *the how*, not *the what*. The *what* was bringing in the kingdom of God. The *how* was different than John thought. He had in mind material, physical, earthly victory over the Roman Empire. Jesus, however, tells and shows that he is not about merely defeating worldly enemies but spiritual ones! Not about hating but loving. Not about taking but serving. Not about demanding from God but submitting. This is the kingdom of God.

Understanding this can help to remove our disappointments in life. Blessed is anyone, says Jesus, who does not fall away on account of me. Different translations of v.6 say,

...blessed is the one who is not offended by me. – ESV

Or ...God bless you if you’re not upset by what I’m doing. – NT Wright

John was upset because he didn’t understand. So Jesus is pleading for John to step back and see God’s way of ushering in the kingdom. “Stop filtering God’s way through your own desires. I know you hate the Roman oppression. You hate the Greek culture that opposes God’s good moral direction.” You and I hate it when we don’t get the healing we want. When we don’t get other things we expected from God. We hate it when God lets the bully get away with his actions. We hate seeing injustice in our world, at least when it affects us. And we have our own ideas—like John—of how God could put things right and make our life better.

Jesus wants John—and you and me—not to be upset with *the how*. If we trust him as the Messiah, we’ll see that the ways of God’s kingdom will succeed far beyond conquering Rome. Jesus teaches John that true life in the Kingdom of God is not about us first and foremost. Jesus calls us to love God and love our neighbours. Boys and girls, it’s not about becoming king of the castle and getting everything our way. It’s about laying down our lives for God and others. As Jesus points out, that’s saying, “Not my will but yours be done!” That’s the life Jesus preached and modeled because he knew the real enemy that needed to be defeated—our sin.

John was living under the rule of an oppressive monarch, Herod Archelaus. Both John and Jesus were born at the time of Archelaus’ father, Herod the Great, who was even more of a tyrant than Archelaus. Herod the Great became so paranoid of losing his throne that he’d kill anyone that simply “smelled” like a threat!

He killed one of his wives. He killed his own sons. Any threat to his monarchy—real or imagined—was struck down with a sword.

Our Lord Jesus was born into this violent world. His human mother and father had to flee in order to save his life from Herod. Yes, we all like to sing about the cattle lowing and the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay. But remember that Herod sent his soldiers to kill every boy under two years old. He didn't care how many boys had to die. He didn't care about the sorrowing mothers and fathers. He only cared about his crown. This is the sin-sick world into which Jesus was born and which he came to redeem. As a baby, Jesus narrowly escaped death at the hand of Herod to save the world from our sin and from Satan's tyranny so that we can live under the rule of God once again. This is the kingdom of God Jesus is building. This is the call of the gospel—to transform hearts and lives and our world by the rule and power of King Jesus.

Clearly, Jesus is not promising a trouble-free life. As we read Matthew 11, it's important to recognize that John did not leave Herod's prison alive. His head was placed on a silver platter for the pleasure and revenge of Herod's family! That doesn't seem right, does it? Would you build a kingdom that way? asks one author. I don't think I would choose to do that. "But we would also not voluntarily come into a hostile place where a man like Herod would try to kill us the moment we're born. We would "not come as king and then allow ourselves to be unjustly accused and falsely convicted by a human court. We would not willingly allow ourselves to be executed by torture as common criminals, and we would not endure the righteous judgment of God in all of its fury for the sake of sinners."

Congregation, looking at Jesus through John's eyes helps us see that Jesus' way of building God's kingdom can involve strange turns of events. It can involve hardships that we wouldn't necessarily sign up for. But, thanks be to God, Jesus willingly signed up for whatever it took to save sinners like us! Jesus is the prince of peace, not a warrior king. He is the king who comes give his life for us. Yes, he comes to change our hearts from self-serving people in our worst state who look like a Herod, people willing to kill to protect our own personal comforts. But Jesus our servant King does not defend his own comfort. He defends his people! We are not disposable pawns if we get in his way. No, he loves us and changes us from enemies of God to children of God. He enables us to love those who hate us. He enables us to preach and live the gospel, as unpopular as it may be in our world today as it was in the days of John the Baptist and Jesus.

However, when we submit our lives to Jesus we are saying, "I trust you with my life come hell or high water! I will follow you and declare your glory and praise because you've ensured my eternal well-being and eternal peace with your sacrificial love. I know I cannot do this on my own. Help me, Lord Jesus, to trust you in the work of building your kingdom in and through the gospel preached and lived in my life. May your kingdom come and your will be done in me. Help me trust you, Lord Jesus, to use my life—in your way—to accomplish the extraordinary work of your kingdom in this world.

You can probably look at people in your own life who have struggled with God in the disappointments of life—like John. And maybe they never saw the fruit of the kingdom they were looking for. John was one of those. But we know that his life was not in vain. He set the stage for Jesus to come so that we can all have salvation. Not merely human freedom from a worldly foe, but victory over sin and Satan and hell.

After my mom broke her neck in a car accident many years ago, my dad prayed every single day for her healing. I don't remember exactly how long but it was at least 2 years—until it seemed clear that the Lord wasn't going to let my mom walk again. There was a lot of disappointment with God's way. My mom, however, slowly came to peace with her new situation, even though she didn't like it. About a year after it all started, she wrote a letter for our church paper. In it, she said, "At first I thought, 'Why me, Lord?' But now I can say, 'Why not me?'" She got grace from God to live with her limitations. And I dare say, my mom's witness for Jesus and his kingdom was more powerful from a wheelchair than it would have been on her legs. From her wheelchair, she not only shared the gospel but lived it and people saw in her the difference that faith in Jesus makes, the grace of God to overcome trials and the peace that comes from resting in his sovereign and loving plan for us all.

All of us experience disappointments in life. We can look at Jesus, like John did, and think or even say, "I don't think your kingdom looks like this? How does my struggle help the kingdom of God?" Only time and faith make that clearer for us. The struggles today remind us that there is a day coming when Jesus returns and makes all things new. Jesus came into our world of disappointments and beat Satan for us! By taking on the pains and sorrows of our world, he guarantees through his death and resurrection that we are victorious, that our life matters and has a purpose in his kingdom. Though we don't always understand his ways, we can trust him as our good and gracious King while we wait for his return.