

3 Advent December 11, 2022
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There are many ways to handle disappointment when things don't go the way they always have in the past, when people or situations fail to live up to expectations, or when a situation doesn't go the way it was planned, or the hoped-for outcome didn't materialize. Some folks handle disappointment by adapting. Others reflect on the difference in their expectations and the outcome. Some people can accept disappointment and forgive. Then there are those who struggle with disappointment in ways that make them feel doubt, grief, anger, and resentment.

If you can relate to the later, then today's Gospel might give you some comfort to find John the Baptist struggling with his disappointing reality. John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament style prophets. He lived in the wilderness because that is where God's people experienced transformation from slavery under Egypt to the freedom to worship God and live the way God wanted. John baptized people in the Jordan River because their ancestors began their transformation by walking through the Red Sea without getting wet. The baptism of John was that of repentance and a sign of a renewed commitment to follow God's ways more closely. John didn't wear the robes of power or status; he wore the clothing of a prophet because he wasn't under the thumb of either Rome or the religious establishment. And John was arrested and thrown in prison for speaking out against the man Rome proclaimed King of the Jews for living contrary to the ways of God.

Which is where we find him in today's Gospel. From his prison cell John sent a message to Jesus that does not look like John had much faith in Jesus. John had been preaching about God's Messiah coming with the fierce fire of judgment and would punish all the evil doers. Yet there John sat in prison, Herod and Rome were still in charge, and Jesus had not led a clever heist to break John out of jail, thus vindicating him. So, he sent Jesus a message that ultimately asked: who are you, really? Are you the one we've waited thousands of years for? Or do we need to keep waiting? Because as Messiahs go, Jesus was pretty disappointing for not doing what John expected or wanted.

It often appears Jesus is not so good at answering questions, especially direct questions. Instead of giving a direct answer to John's question, Jesus takes us back to the first lesson we heard today from the prophet Isaiah who described a vision of justice, renewal of creation, mercy, and restoration as the coming of God's kingdom on earth.

Incidentally, this is one of my favorite Old Testament passages because it is the official Bible passage of my alma mater, Northland College. Northland's motto is

taken directly from this passage which is “A Highway Shall Be There”. Often people who are not familiar with the Bible did not understand why the first environmental liberal arts college in the country would have such a motto, as it sounded like environmental degradation instead of restoration of creation. The reference to the Biblical passage is a nod to Northland’s founding by Lutheran missionaries 130 years ago. It is also the heart and soul of Northland’s intention to provide a transformational educational experience where students learn how to be part of the world and community while living a higher value of care for creation and each other. Recently, Northland hired a Biblical scholar to retranslate the phrase so that it better reflects both the passage and Northland’s credo. The new translation is: “A Higher Way. A Deeper Life.” It’s a good translation, as Northland grads – no matter our chosen profession or callings – we do try to live in a way that positively impacts the places where we work and live.

This is what Jesus was pointing to when answering John the Baptist’s question. Instead of giving a direct answer, he responded by pointing out the impact he was having. He was not having a destructive or punitive impact, but he was restoring wholeness by healing and forgiving. True he wasn’t healing every person on the planet, he wasn’t working in big numbers, just one person at a time as a sign of what was present and what is to come and that God values each of us. Jesus brought with him a higher way and a deeper life, one of mercy and forgiveness through which Jesus is not only fulfilling scriptures, he is bringing God’s kingdom to this world.

Jesus also spoke to the crowds about who John the Baptist was. He wasn’t a political figurehead, nor an agent of the government. Jesus did not insult John for his question or question John’s faith or ministry. Like the Canticle we sang this morning, the song of Mary called the Magnificat warns us, there are those who will interpret Jesus’ acts of healing and forgiveness negatively because they disrupt the status quo by reversing the way things are which can make some feel uncomfortable. When someone isn’t punished the way we want, it can feel like injustice. Jesus’ higher way and deeper life breaks the cycle of violence and punishment with mercy, healing, forgiveness, and restoration one person at a time, in such small ways, it isn’t easy for everyone to understand or accept, maybe even cause disappointment.

The season of Advent offers us the opportunity to reflect on disappointments like John the Baptist did. This being the third Sunday in Advent, we lit the candle of a different color in the Advent Wreath because today is Gaudete Sunday, a day to rejoice. This theme of rejoicing seems out of place with today’s Gospel where John is in prison nursing disappointments and possibly making us consider our own response to unmet expectations, unexpected changes in our lives, or losses that feel

like they just keep coming. Sometimes I suspect we mistake the religious expression of *rejoice* with the unbridled gorging of self-indulgence. Rejoice isn't like a party. It's not about feeling good or giddy like you might feel after your team wins the big game. Rejoicing is not dependent on how *we* feel. It is a spiritual practice like prayer that calls us to be open to and aware of the grace of God active in the world, like we heard in all our readings today.

Those acts of grace may not be large, loud, or extravagant, but they are signs of God present and at work making an impact. A few weeks ago, I met a group of students who were worried our Covid-19 Memorial had been damaged intentionally and called me late at night to alert me to the damage. While the damage was most likely caused by accident, probably by one of the deer that have been around, that encounter revealed God's grace through the connection the students feel to the Memorial. And that connection makes them care about it. That is a tiny step of restoration, connection, and is evidence one of our ministries is having a positive impact on the lives of our neighbors. To some this might seem small or insignificant, but not to God. To God no one is small or insignificant, all of us are of immense value, because caring is a form of love and a connection to that higher way and deeper life. And that is cause for rejoicing even when facing disappointments.