

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ ¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Are you waiting for the Messiah to come or have you given up hope? Do you expect one to come who will make the wilderness and the dry land glad as Isaiah promised – the desert blossom? Do you expect waters in the wilderness – streams in the desert? The blind receiving their sight – the ears of the deaf unstopped – the lame leaping like a deer – the tongue of the speechless singing for joy?

Someday, you say.

But I thought Jesus is the Messiah and he has already come. And deserts still are dry and the blind are led by guide dogs.

O sometimes a little water leaks in. I saw Dick Sering a week ago. Cancer should have long since killed him – everything I know about cancer – everything the doctors know says he should be dead but he still is going to work five days a week at Lutheran Metro Ministry. All the prayers that weren’t answered for my mother seem to be answered for him. I believe his being alive is close to a miracle even if he should die tomorrow but I don’t expect that miracle for many. Maybe it is a matter of faith – or prayers.

It certainly is not a matter of how highly Jesus regards a person. Jesus said that of men born of a woman no one has arisen who is greater than John the Baptist. But Jesus performed no miracle to keep John alive when the dancing girl requested John's head on a platter.

So what can you expect?

Jesus did not keep his disciples from suffering for the faith – most died for the faith – so what can I expect?

What does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah?

John the Baptist was trying to figure that out.

“Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?” John was asking this question because he had heard about Jesus' works. The blind received their sight, the deaf heard, a dead girl was raised. But John was still in prison. And bombs are still exploding in Jerusalem. Has the Messiah come to do some isolated miracles? Or will things change?

Most Christians think about it in this way – Jesus the Messiah came – died on the cross to win forgiveness of sins and salvation - he was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven and we are waiting for the Messiah to come. Just the way the Jews of Jesus day were waiting. And until the Messiah comes only a little of the water of the new day seeps through.

Yes, Jesus is the one who is to come. And we are waiting.

We rejoice when a Dick Sering is alive for years beyond medical expectations but we know he will die one day.

We rejoice when we hear of prayers answered. But we know of so many more that are met with silence.

We celebrate when prison doors are flung open as Isaiah promised, but we know that far too many fine men and women wait with little hope of release..

“Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?”

Jesus is the one who is to come and we wait.

But as I prepared for this sermon this week I realized that there is a surprise hidden in this gospel. The last words of this Gospel, the gospel according to St. Matthew, are not I will come again but are the words of Jesus, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.”

That is not a promise about Jesus being up in heaven but a promise that Jesus is here, with you. These words occur in no other gospel, - not in Mark or Luke or John. They are like a story of the last Judgement that also is told in this gospel only. It is the story of the sheep being separated from the goats – the saved separated from those who are banished from God’s presence. And in that story Jesus says, “When I was hungry you fed me, naked you clothed me, sick or in prison you visited me.”

“I am with you always,” our Lord is saying – with you in the person of your neighbor in need. The poor you will have with you always – and in them I will be with you, also.

What it means is that Advent is not a time for watching the clouds or searching the events of our days to discover the moment of our Lord’s returning. Nor is Advent a time for thinking about the child of Bethlehem and imagining our embracing him. No, what it means is that in Advent and every moment you will encounter the one who is to come in every person you meet – Jesus in every person you can help. He is with you always – but not as a warm glow in your heart but as a neighbor who needs your love.

When will Jesus come again? He will come to you in a few moments in the person who reaches out a hand and says, “The peace of the Lord.”

And he will come to that person in you.

