

Advent 3 C
December 12, 2021
CCM

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Despite all the trouble he has gotten himself into over the years, I still think Woody Allen's movies are quite funny. One of my favorites has always been, "Love and Death, his parody of the great Russian fiction written by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and others. At the end of the film, we find the central character, played by Allen, in a dark dungeon, awaiting execution. He has taken part in what was considered by those involved a great and noble plot to assassinate the tyrannical Czar. Unfortunately, he has been caught in the process, and now his execution is near. And as he is sitting there in his cell, trying to figure out what has gone wrong, he declares, "If God would speak to me – just once! If he would only cough. If I could just see a miracle! If I could see a burning bush, or the seas part! Or if, once, just once, Uncle Sasha would pick up the check!"

While his presentation of the situation is quite funny, the reality Woody Allen is addressing is quite serious and quite real. Indeed, while we may never have spent time behind bars, locked in up in a dark prison cell, I suspect many of us know what it means to be imprisoned – that sense of hopelessness and desperation – that sense of loss of control over all that is going on in our lives... that experience Jesus so powerfully and painfully expresses on the cross... that sense of "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

I have been thinking a great deal about John the Baptist this week. About his campaign out there in the wilderness of the Jordan calling the people back into a right relationship with their God. About his cry for repentance...a changing of one's heart that results in a return to the God who loves us first. About the need to allow our change of hearts to also change our actions and the way we behave towards our neighbors. And about his crystal clear belief that he was not the Messiah, not the chosen one, for, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

And I have been thinking about John's death as reported in Matthew chapter 11 and Mark chapter 6. Here we discover that, having spent his lifetime wandering free through the deserts of Judea, John now lies in chains in the darkness of Herod's dungeon beneath his fortress in Machaerus. John had received the call of God, and with the boldness of a prophet, had declared to his people that the time had come to repent, for the kingdom of heaven was drawing near. Again, he had warned them, in most vivid detail, about the end and what would happen to those who refused

repentance. And he had, with his own hands, baptized thousands who had heeded his words and sought to be cleansed from their sins. Those must have been heady days for John. And now they were over.

He has been silenced. He will never be seen or heard again by those crowds. And as he lies there, he realizes that his whole life and ministry is now called into question. "Where is my God?" he must wonder. "Where is this kingdom I have been preaching about? How close is it really? And what about this Jesus of Nazareth? I've told my followers that he is the one, the Messiah of God. And yet, he doesn't act like any messiah I had expected. My God, have I been tricked? Is this all a hoax?"

According to Matthew, as John broods over these things, several of his disciples come to visit. And before they depart, John tells them to go and see Jesus and ask him the one question that matters most of all: "ARE YOU THE ONE TO COME, OR ARE WE TO WAIT FOR ANOTHER?"

In asking the question, John speaks for all of us in this Advent season. He is living in darkness, caught between the current predicaments of his world and what he had so desperately longed and hoped for. He is a prisoner in this world, in need of a deliverer. Even John, a prophet, is not spared this dark night of the soul, nor his hunger for salvation. Like all of us, John seeks a savior. And so he sends his followers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one...?"

Advent reminds each one of us that we are in need of salvation. And if this season goes by without reminding us of the current darkness in our own lives, or of the evil at work in the world today, then the true meaning of Christmas and the incarnation, the healing present in that child lying in a manger, is lost.

"Are you the one?" In response to John's need for a savior, God sends his son. And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the 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..."

Please notice that Jesus does not give a "yes" or "no" answer. Neither does he seek John's intellectual assent by way of a theological treatise. Jesus simply asks John to consider that works that Jesus has done...and thus decide whether he is willing to trust or not.

'Are you the one?' we ask during this Advent season. "Are you the one to set us free from sin and fear and death that so completely imprisons us and give to our lives whole new meaning?"

"Are you willing to trust?" comes God's reply. "Then come and see. Pack your bags, make your way to Bethlehem, and come and see." Amen.