

Sermon – Advent 3 – Rev. Sean Bell of Resurrection Lutheran Church, Saskatoon

Hey everyone... this one got a little long but I really wanted to tell the story of Brian and I lost in the wilderness. As a tip, you might have someone else read the 'story' part so that the people hear a different voice. Peace to you on your Sunday! I pray that God's word and the hope of Advent comes through these words!

Matthew 11:2-11

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

7 As 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? 8 What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

11 "Truly 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."

Today we hear a question that comes from the very heart of faith.
John the Baptist...John the fierce one, John the prophet in the wilderness, John the voice crying out...sits alone in a prison cell and asks:

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?”

This is not a question from someone who never believed.
This is a question from someone who believed so deeply that he risked everything for the truth.

And now John sits in chains. Waiting for the promised Messiah. Wondering what is going on...

There is a lot here about expectations, and what happens when the reality of life and faith does not match the story we imagined or really wanted to be true.

And to get into that, I want to start with a story.

STORY: “Brian and Sean on Isaiah’s road through the wilderness”

In the late fall of 1992, I was sixteen years old. My friend Brian, also sixteen, called me up and said, “Hey, let’s go for a drive out in the country.” We were farm kids in southern Alberta, and that’s what you did for fun in 1992.

A few minutes later he arrived in the farm work truck: a big, heavy three-quarter-ton. We headed out onto the grid roads, then took a right turn into some lease land. It didn’t feel like a long drive, but before we knew it we were way down near the Bow river, in the middle of nowhere.

If you look on google maps just north of Vauxhall Alberta you'll see lush green circles where the irrigation brings life from dry land. And as you follow highway 36 north just before the river, you'll see the green circles end and the wilderness begin. Lease land where cattle graze for the summer.

We started doing circles and spinning some donuts... like young guys in a truck do. And then, without really planning it, we drove into a sandy patch...

... And there is a movement and feeling that all farm kids in 2wd farm trucks know all too well... it's a sinking feeling....

The rear wheels spun, sank, and we were stuck.

We tried digging with tools that weren't really meant for digging. We jammed different things under the tires to get traction, but the truck was heavy, only rear-wheel drive, and we weren't getting out.

We turned to God in prayer as Brian was a good Mennonite and I a good Lutheran kid... but no angel appeared to lift the truck... there would be no miracle lift.

As the sun began to fade on that cool fall evening, we started searching the truck for something warm to wear...

This was an unplanned trip so I was wearing shorts and flip-flop sandals. Brian had rubber boots with no socks...

The truck did not provide much...

There was a thin plastic rain coat that I put on... clear plastic with some camouflage...

and Brian got the blue thread barren plaid work shirt with the oil stains on it.

We sat there shivering... getting colder and realized we would have to walk out.

So we started down the lease road as darkness settled in and the stars came out. No cellphones, no lights... just a gravel road that we could barely see quickly disappearing into the darkness.

Isaiah mentioned that the road through the wilderness is straight... and even fools could not get lost on it. We had to claim that vague hope because we only sort of knew where we were...

After half an hour into the walk we started laughing. We noticed that none of the lights on the horizon seemed to be getting closer. It felt like we were in a twilight zone episode... walking and not moving...

And the stars had come out but they were not really moving either...

The road behind us disappeared into darkness. The road ahead disappeared into darkness. We were walking but there seemed to be no progress.

We kept walking...maybe two and a half hours. Blisters started to form. We stumbled onto the correction line. We had come to the edge of the green circles

and irrigation... and there was a yard light about half a mile away where we found a helpful farm family, and we made the call to be rescued.

It was a lesson in getting stuck in the middle of nowhere and making better choices...

A lesson of walking that road because there is nothing else to do... and I remembered this as I read Isaiah this week...

Here in Canada, when we think of “wilderness,” we often imagine big trees, rushing water, and the kind of wilderness we like to camp in... But there’s another kind of wilderness: dry, flat prairie where there’s no water, very little growing, and nothing on the horizon.

Isaiah is speaking of a wilderness more like a desert...where there isn’t much hope.

Isaiah is giving hope of a road that cuts through the lifeless wilderness.

So when he calls for a road to be put through that wilderness...and says the road will be so clear that even fools will find their way...you can hear the hope in it.

It’s still dry and difficult... and it’s hard to see the ending... but it’s a road to walk on...

And In a place that looks empty and lifeless, Isaiah promises a way forward. A straight road in the wilderness: something to follow, even in the dark.

Transition our of story mode:

So let’s step back into this moment in the Gospel.

Last week we stood before the image from Isaiah:

the Root of Jesse...life growing from something that looked fully dead.

A stump cut down.

A promise cut short.

A community that had seen more loss than growth.

And Isaiah dared to say:

“New life is coming. God makes futures out of dead ends.”

That is the big, wild truth of Advent:

God’s inbreaking is announced in the wilderness where everything seems dead...

This is where hope is born.
Not in palaces.
Not in places of power.
But in places of impossibility.

This is Advent waiting...
And now the story moves to an uncomfortable place...

Last week John was standing tall:

- preaching truth to power,
- calling people to a new world, shouting REPENT.
- pointing at Jesus and saying, "That is the One."

This week...he is in a prison cell.
Not because he was wrong,
but because he told the truth.

He is under arrest because he looked Herod in the face and said,
"You cannot marry your sister-in-law."
He dared to put boundaries on Power. To speak truth to power...

And the empire answered him with chains.

This is the part of the story that challenges our expectations:

It seems unfair but...:
you can be faithful, you can be courageous,
you can be obedient to God's call...and still end up in a place you never
wanted to go.

So John asks Jesus a tough question:
"Are you the one... or should we wait for another?"

There is something in that question that resonates with life and faith.

We all want the results now.
We want the promises realized today.

We want the transformation to be visible and immediate. Here and now!!!

Doubtful follow up questions form:

If God is here...why is the world still cracked?

If Jesus is the Messiah...why do the empires still kill prophets?

If the Root of Jesse has begun to grow...why is the stump still so visible?

John asks the question on behalf of all of us. **Are you the one?**

And **Jesus does not rebuke him.**

Jesus doesn't say,

"John, where is your faith? Have you forgotten everything?"

Jesus simply says:

"Go and tell John what you see."

Not what you wish you saw.

Not what you expected to see.

But what is actually happening.

And the answer Jesus gives is small on purpose... stories of individuals from small places on the edges of power. Small signs of wholeness and healing:

- The blind see.
- The deaf hear.
- The lepers are cleansed.
- The poor receive good news.

Not everybody is healed.

Not everything is restored.

Not all injustice has ended.

John essentially hears:

The Kingdom is here, even while the world is still broken.

And Jesus follows it with a blessing for John who is in pain...

“Blessed is the one who does not stumble because of me.”

Meaning:

Blessed is the one who doesn't trip over a Messiah
who is too gentle for our expectations,
too human,
too small,
too non-violent,
too interested in mercy instead of victory.

This is how God grows the Root of Jesse.

This is what the road in the wilderness is.

Not by overthrowing empire,
but by building a whole different world underneath it.

John will not get everything he wants.

And that is the part we don't want to hear in Advent:
John will be killed in a travesty of Justice.

The empire will do what empires does.
And yet...**Jesus calls him blessed.**

...

Because hope is not the same as expectation.
Expectation demands a certain outcome.
Expectation tries to script God.
Expectation says,
“God, it has to look like this.”

Hope is different.
Hope trusts that God is present even in unfinished places.
Hope acts as if love is stronger, long before love has won.
Hope dares to see small miracles as evidence of a larger promise.

It is easy to have faith when the mountains move.

But John asks us to have hope when sometimes nothing moves and you still choose to live and love anyway. When the prayer is unanswered and the powerful seem to get away with it.

Sometimes the truck is stuck in wilderness... and it's time to walk.

It seems a trite little example to speak of two farm boys walking 10 km's in the night as a proper metaphor for being stuck somewhere you don't want to be... of setting shivering blistered foot one step in front of the other.

Yet maybe it's good to have small examples... because the echo of the story...

The honesty of John.

The frustration of John.

The confusion of John.

The longing for messiah that John puts words too is echoed throughout the lived experienced now.

John's cry:

"Are you the one who is to come?"...

is not just a line from John's prison cell.

It is a cry that rises from people who live in cracked places today.

The people of Sudan and all war torn places,

"Are you the one who is to come?"

as war starves villages and cities and the collective world looks away or can't find a solution.

Families in Gaza ask,

"Where is the one who is to come?"

As death and explosions and rubble are part of the advent waiting even though the fighting was supposed to have stopped....

And here, closer to home, so much to address.

The medical challenges on our prayer list...

The loved ones that we had to say goodbye too... too soon... over the years.

The waiting for policy that gives health care, water, equal human rights ...

or maybe the hope that the government will see the full humanity of everyone and stop removing human rights from certain people.

There are still tears.

There are still people waiting for justice.

“Where is the one who is to come?”

This is an Advent prayer.

We hold the tension of coming Messiah... and the truth of Emmanuel... with the truth of our lived experience.

The world is not healed.

The world is not whole.

The world is not yet what God dream and intends it to be.

Today we hear the good news that Advent is not pretending.

Advent is not optimism.

But instead we see that...

Advent is courage.

Advent is saying:

Even in the cracks, God is at work.

Even when unjust prisons still stand,

even when empires still crush,

even when dignity is threatened,

Into this we also see the Kingdom growing up in the cracks...

Emmanuel, God with us... Love come down...

Love does not wait for certainty.

Love begins to act now.

So what do we do with John's question?

We answer it the way Jesus told us to:

“Go and tell what you see.”

Look for the Kingdom breaking in:

- small healings and hopes towards wholeness,
- small reconciliations towards wholeness,
- people showing up for each other and holding each other in the pain,
- movements of people to care, and protest.
- activism rooted in compassion,
- a church community that refuses to abandon the vulnerable,
- communities that hold one another up.

Not perfect.

Not finished.

Not ignoring what is real.

So the good news Emmanuel... of Advent waiting and longing, is a movement of blessing and prayer.

Blessed are you who ask the question.

Blessed are you who wait in the dark places.

**Blessed are you who see healing happen one life at a time,
even while your prison still stands.**

May the Root of Jesse teach your eyes to cherish small growth.

May Jesus continue to teach your heart to trust a Kingdom born in compassion

And may the Spirit give you courage to love this world now

It isn't finished, we have a long road to walk...

But thanks be to God it is still being healed.

Amen.