

St. Stephen

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Preacher: Fr. Wade Miller

- [0:00] There are certain Christians who think that they are more pious than God. Some Christians believe one should never ask questions about their faith. They should never voice any doubt, at least not out loud. And I guess those people do not read many of the Psalms. In our gospel text this morning, we heard from St. John the Baptist. When John heard how Jesus went about preaching and teaching, he sent two disciples back to ask our Lord the following question. Are you the coming one, or do we look for another? In looking at certain commentaries on this text, there were some theologians that almost seemed embarrassed by John's question. They thought John couldn't have been raised having some kind of issue or crisis of faith. He is the boisterous preacher who called the enemies of Jesus poisonous snakes and bellowed out the need for all to repent.
- [1:24] John wasn't faltering here. He was merely clarifying. Well, I think John, like all the disciples of our Lord throughout the gospels, was really trying to grasp who Jesus was. You see, the Messiah, the long-awaited promised King of Israel, was thought to come and bring sweeping justice to this earth and to set up Jerusalem as the place where he would then reign over all nations. That's what John thought. That's what the disciples thought. That's what all from Israel thought when they thought about the coming Messiah or King. Isaiah chapter 1, verses 24 through 28, captures the belief and hope of John and the disciples and speaking about what would happen when the Messiah finally arrived. We read in Isaiah chapter 1, Therefore the Lord says, The Lord of hosts, the mighty one of Israel, Ah, I will rid myself of my adversaries.
- [2:43] And I will take vengeance on my enemies. I will turn my hand against you and thoroughly purge away your dross and take away all your alloy. I will restore your judges as at the first and your counselors as at the beginning. And afterward, you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed with justice and her penitence with righteousness. And the destruction of transgressors and of sinners shall be together and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed. St. John the Baptist, like all faithful Israelites, believed that when Christ appeared or when the Christ finally came, he would bring full retribution on evil and God's righteousness would reign forever and ever. Amen. But instead of righteousness and justice, John the Baptist is in prison on death row.
- [4:03] I think this helps explain why John says to the disciples, go and ask Jesus if he's really the one or should we be expecting another?

One who will bring shock and awe as we have known, spoken from the prophets of old. Jesus responds to John's question.

He says, go and tell John the things which you hear and the things which you see. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear and the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

And blessed, blessed is he who is not offended because of me. Friends, we often have the same type of question as John the Baptist, don't we?

If God is really in control, what's up with all these diseases and viruses? If God is really in control, why do such horrible things happen?

[5 : 23] Why do we witness such natural disasters like the recent tornadoes that rip through the Midwest, killing many, especially in the state of Kentucky?

If God is in control, why am I such a mental anguish? If God is in control, why is my body falling apart? If God is in control, why am I experiencing such hurt and deep pain?

If you don't ask those questions, I don't know what to say. But I think, especially in the last two years, we've all, at least that question, has entered into our mind.

And that's led to many today what is called deconstructing their faith, meaning going back to a place of absolute and utter unbelief.

And this is happening a lot because Christianity doesn't quite check the boxes for personal fulfillment. And the answer our Lord gives to such questions and doubt is simply that despite all the anguish, the hurt, the pain, the fact of the matter is the finality of death itself has lost its power because it has been destroyed.

[6 : 56] The blind seeing, the lame walking, the lepers and disease being healed and the dead being raised up from the grave all speak to the glorious and grand miracle that is at the heart and soul of the Christian faith.

And it's simply this. God has come in human flesh. He's come in the midst of our pain and our suffering.

And he has come to feel our pain. He has come to suffer our loss and to reach down in the bowels of death and hell in order to transform death now to eternal life.

That is the heart of what we believe. That's the crux of the Christian message. And that's our hope.

Our hope rests on the Jesus who came into this world to live a perfect and obedient life, to suffer and die a horrific death in our place as our substitute and to be raised to new life, overcoming death in the grave.

[8 : 15] And he now reigns forever and ever. And that reign will be made visible when he comes again. And that's what Advent is all about. It's preparing for the coming of our King.

Jesus reigns. And we are called to put our faith and our trust not in the circumstances, not in the pain, not in all the mess, but in him.

Dear friends, although we might feel like we're in a type of prison, man, we witness absolute madness all around us, especially today.

And although we might think that that glimmer of hope that we once had is slowly slipping away, our Lord says to you, blessed is he who is not offended because of me.

Things might not work out. They probably won't according to your plan. But God is fulfilling his plan in you. And as a baptized child of God, you are called to live in the promised hope that evil and death do not have the final say.

[9 : 32] Because that eternal word has become flesh in the person of Jesus who is the Christ. And he calls all of us to look past the pain, the hardships, the brokenness of today and to keep our eyes on him.

We are to have faith that God has the final word, even in a fallen world. But this fallen world has received her promised king.

And he is coming to bring everlasting peace and righteousness to all who feel the loneliness and the hurt and the alienation of this world.

I love the way a popular 16th century catechism spells this out as it asks the question, what is your only comfort in life and in death?

Answer, that I am not my own, but belong with body and soul both in life and death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

[10:50] He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood and he has set me free from the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head.

Indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Friends, that's our calling as baptized Christians. We live in a strange, getting stranger, foreign land. But we are called to work for the good of the kingdom of God, putting our faith, putting our focus, putting our trust on Christ, preparing for his coming, trusting that one day he will bring perfect peace and perfect justice to this earth for all eternity.

Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.