

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
December 11, 2022 – Advent 3
Isaiah 35:1-10; Canticle 15; Matthew 11:2-11
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning we have been blessed to hear a wonderful selection of readings from scripture! These lessons are so rich, it is difficult to know where to begin to speak about them.

First, let's pick up the account of John the Baptist that we began last week. John was a great Jewish religious leader with a large following. He had been baptizing people in the Jordan River and preaching this message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." John pointed to Jesus as the One through whom the kingdom of heaven had come near, the Messiah, the Holy One of God.

The events we just heard about took place much later. John the Baptist was a prophet who had dared to speak God's word to an ungodly world and like prophets before and since, he was punished by people in power who would not hear God's message. John had criticized the ruler Herod for marrying his dead brother's wife, Herodias, a relationship that Jewish law regarded as incestuous. For this Herod put John in prison. Later he would have John executed.

John had many disciples. While he was in prison he heard from these disciples about Jesus. You can imagine how interested John was. After all, he had pointed to Jesus as the Messiah long hoped for by the Jewish people. Had he been right? Or had he been mistaken after all? We can picture a man in prison – a religious leader prevented from preaching and leading – thinking, wondering, perhaps doubting himself. And so, he sends word to Jesus through his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

It would have been very dangerous for Jesus to reply with the message, "Yes, I am the Messiah." John was in prison, where Herod's guards would hear and report what they heard to Herod, who would have regarded a man claiming to be the Messiah as a threat, a person to get rid of. Instead, Jesus refers to the saving work of God spoken of by the prophet Isaiah long before. "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." In other words, "John, knowing what you know about God, interpret the signs of God's saving work which I am doing, and you will have your answer."

Have you ever had a vivid memory come to mind and stay with you? A memory you were sure had something to teach you? This week as I thought about the lessons appointed for today, I had that experience. And I would like to share my memory and my thoughts with you.

In the late 1980's I worked as a school psychologist for the Association for the Help of Retarded Children, as it was then called, in New York City. AHRC had many programs for young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including special schools. At the time there was a song that was extremely popular – "We Are the World" by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie. Do you remember this spectacularly popular hit song and its recording by the biggest musical superstars of the day? Do you remember USA for Africa, the effort which raised millions of dollars for famine relief? The song has beautiful lyrics that encourage everyone to care and to share to save the lives of starving people. The refrain is: "We are the world. We are the children. We are the ones who make a brighter day, so let's start giving. There's a choice we're making. We're saving our own lives. It's true we'll make a better day, just you and me."

My memory is of watching teenagers in one of the special schools singing that song for the younger students. Not performing the song as we might mean by that, but singing along to a recording as best they could. They didn't get most of the words of the verses. But when the refrain came on, many of them could sing along – "We are the world. We are the children. We are the ones who make a brighter day..." Those young people were so happy singing along. All the adults in the school were happy to watch them. But I remember having tears in my eyes and a feeling that my heart would break while I watched because I knew something of the challenges and obstacles these young people would be facing.

Their bright days might be few and far between because of disabilities they bore through no fault of their own.

And this week, when I recalled this scene, I imagined Jesus looking on. I imagined what a depth of compassion he would feel, if I could feel heartbroken for these kids. That vision brought me to my soul's knees to adore our compassionate, merciful God. Jesus, who told John what he had been doing: "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." All these miracles flowing from compassion and mercy.

Jesus had identified John the Baptist as the person about whom it was written by the prophet Malachi (3:1), "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." Jesus said that John was the greatest of the prophets, the greatest person in history until that moment. "Yet," says Jesus, "yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." These few words teach us that the door to greatness in God's eyes is open for everyone.

Today's lessons offer us a vision of hope. Hope that in the next world, if not in this, in God's kingdom there will be healing. The afflicted – like those young people I watched sing so many years ago – will be made whole. All of us will be healed. There will be justice and equity. The lessons also give us an assignment – to change our view of the world radically and to do what we can in this life to bring in the kingdom of God.

If we take to heart and mind and will God's vision for humanity, every part of our lives will be affected. How we pray. How we think and how we speak. How we spend our time and our money. Who our friends are. How we behave with people we know and with strangers. What we read and how we vote. Everything. Because practicing our religion may be a once a week on Sunday morning event, but living our faith becomes deeper and more pervasive and more encompassing all the time.

Living our faith is not easy, as anyone who tries to do so knows. How do we hold onto God's vision of humanity when the driver behind us is trying to bully us into driving faster by riding on our bumper? When we see people who look mean and act selfishly? When we even glimpse the news of the world? When we honestly look into our own hearts and minds and find contempt for others or prejudice?

Living our faith means joining God's vision and God's work. A good beginning is to look for the signs of God's kingdom around us and within us. How are the eyes of the blind being opened? How are those who have not been able to hear now hearing? How are the disabled restored to functioning? How are the outcasts made acceptable? How are the dead being raised to new life? How are those who are poor in any way having good news brought to them? We may have to look in unexpected places, like a handful of intellectually challenged teenagers singing along with musical superstars in words beyond their understanding, forever beyond their experience in this life. If we do not look carefully, we might miss the signs of God at work in the world and in us. When we see, we need to remember what we have seen and Who has been at work.

Finally, we need to remember who we are: Christ's body in the world today. We are called to be part of the coming of God's kingdom into the world now. We are called to participate in the signs of God's coming. We are meant to act so that others may see the working of God in us. We are called to bring healing, new life, good news, and hope to others, so that they may praise God for what God has done for them. We are called to "make a brighter day" for others near and far, in whatever way we can.

St. Teresa of Avila, the 16th century Spanish mystic and religious reformer, reminds us of what our lives are to be about, in words for us to take to heart: "Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world. Yours are the hands. Yours are the feet. Yours are the eyes. You are His body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours." May God give us hearts of compassion and the grace to be Christ's body in the world here and now. Amen.