



No One Escapes Disappointment

TEXT
Matthew 11:2—15

December 8, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I don't know what you think about John the Baptist. This bug-eating wilderness baptizer seems like a strange conversation partner when we are lighting the candle of peace and singing of angels we have heard on high. He seems so certain of himself; I suppose that's just the way of prophets. I don't know what you think of him. Jesus loved him. Jesus said no prophet had been greater. Not Moses. Not Jeremiah. Not Isaiah. That's high praise.

John was the wilderness man who everyone went out to hear. John said, "Unless you are basing your life on what really matters, you are wasting your life." And then he reminded folks what matters. He had a charisma about him, that's for sure. It wasn't that he told folks what they wanted to hear. It's that he told them the truth. That's what people loved about him. He was a great man — the kind of man you would want to know.

But there was another side of John. This other side was anxious and second-guessing, and fully acquainted with disappointment. The same truth-telling that drew folks from near and far also threatened folks who more than anything wanted to baptize the status quo.

You know this about prophets. The real gift of the prophets is the ability to see. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says, the prophets "know what they see rather than simply seeing what they already know."¹ They see the way things really are. But some folks only see what they already know. They have a story, a narrative of how things are, and they prefer their story to the truth.

Herod was one of those storytellers. Herod put John in jail. Jail was not on John's bucket list. As the prophet of God, he didn't expect to be thrown in the clink. No, John expected that Jesus would come with the kind of power that would put a small man like Herod on the run. But instead, Herod reigns ... and the baptizer is behind bars. He is in crisis, and the crisis is not simply that Herod reigns; the crisis is that Jesus has disappointed him.

There is a moment in Anne Tyler's novel *Saint Maybe*. Ian Bedlow is sending his kids to camp run by the Church of the Second Chance. Ian grew up Presbyterian, but he had found meaning in a church called the Church of the Second Chance. Ian's father expresses a degree of disapproval. He says, "When I was seventeen, I volunteered

to be a counselor at my church's camp out in western Maryland. That's because I was in love with this girl who taught archery there. Marie, her name was. I can see her still. ... Every night I prayed and prayed for her to love me back. I said, 'God, if you'll do this one thing for me, I'll believe in you forever and I'll never ask another favor.' But she preferred the lifeguard. ... After that, why, me and God just never have been that chummy."²

I suppose we learn pretty early that God can't be trusted to come through on all of our hopes and plans. Life will disappoint you.

John's real disappointment is with Jesus. He thought Jesus would be more powerful than he has proved to be. John peers through the bars of his jail cell and asks, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another?" Are you really the Messiah or just my cousin? Jesus, was I wrong about you?

And Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you see: the eyes of the blind are opened, the lame walk ... the dead are raised, the poor hear good news."

These are words John knew by heart. They were words from Isaiah. They were images that Isaiah used to describe the com-

ing of God's promised day. The blind see, the dead are raised, the poor hear good news.

I think John was hoping to hear, "Don't worry, John, I'm going to bust you out of there." But that's not what he said. It was a hard thing, and it wasn't going to change.

And this is where I think this gets real for us. You know that God will not keep you from trouble. You know that. You know that faith will not pave a pathway of pleasures.

Life will disappoint you. You will be disappointed in yourself sometime. America will disappoint you. You will be disappointed in the church sometimes. Sometimes your friends will let you down. Sometimes the disappointment feels more cosmic, just that the world seems to be going in the wrong direction, and you feel powerless to do anything about it. Which is another way of saying, sometimes God disappoints us. Not even the greatest and most faithful of prophets escape disappointment.

Jesus tells John, "It's not going to change. I can't get you out of there."

What John learns is that the way of God in Jesus is not to overthrow those who do evil. The way of God in Jesus is not to eliminate oppressors in life. The way of God through Jesus is to love even in the broken places, to love even in the loveless places, until blind eyes are opened and we see ourselves in new ways; until the decayed and lifeless parts of our lives are reborn; until the hatreds and fears that

paralyze us are shaken free and we learn to walk.

Jesus shows John that the power of the Messiah is not to destroy everything that is wrong, but to love even those who do wrong.

If I understand the text, Jesus says the eyes of faith empower us to see the good in us and in the world. We need more of that. You see, when we are disappointed, sometimes the disappointment can define everything we see in the world. And that kills us.

No, what Jesus says is "John, look for the good."

Several of you have shared with me your enjoyment of the movie about Mr. Rogers. One of the things that Fred Rogers would say is "When trouble comes, look for the helpers." This is a spiritual practice that I think we need these days.

Fred Rogers went to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and was a Presbyterian minister. Another graduate of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is Dr. Bob Meneilly, founding pastor of this congregation. I called him on Wednesday. It was the 25th anniversary of his retirement as being pastor of Village. He asked about you: "How is Village?" He told me to be kind to my wife. He knows that sometimes the pastor's schedule, like a lot of other vocations, can be a challenge for families. And as we hung up, he said, "Be of good cheer." If you know him, you have heard him say that.

"Good cheer" — it comes from the gospel of John 16:33. It says, "Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." The

word translated "good cheer" is *tharseo*. *Tharseo* is also translated "courage." As a matter of fact, our pew Bibles translate this verse, "Take courage, I have conquered the world." I love that *tharseo* means both courage and good cheer. I think to live in this world to be of good cheer requires courage. To be a person of good cheer is an act of courage.

I think that's what Jesus was telling John: "Be of good cheer, my friend." For even in this broken and fearful world, the love of God is still alive. This love will not change every oppressive power, but the promised day of God is breaking into history.

This is important. This is the way it seems to me. Maybe you will understand what I mean: When we are disappointed, sometimes the disappointment can become the lens through which we see all of life. Disappointment has a power tempting us to see ourselves as defined by the worst in us; tempting us to see others defined by the worst in them.

If I understand what Jesus is saying, he says the evil is real, but it is incomplete. It's not the whole story, and what he encourages is to look for the good. Look for the good, for the beautiful, for the honorable in life.

I was talking with a friend of mine, and I made this point. I said, "I think as people of faith, we need to look for the good in others."

He smiled and said, "You do sound like a preacher, so naive."

I said, "I don't know. I don't think it is naive as much as it is courageous. What's easy is to

see the bad. It's easy to see the brokenness all around us, and it's real. It's just not the whole story, so we have to look for the good."

Matt is a pastor and a friend of mine and a courageous man. He's in my Moveable Feast group with me. Matt told his father that he loved him.³ He was leaving his father in inpatient psychiatric care. Matt's dad was consumed by depression. Matt said when the depression came, his charismatic father disappeared without leaving. Matt told him he loved him because he did, and because he felt that if his dad remembered just how much he was loved, he wouldn't be sad anymore.

Matt was 16 at the time. As he grew older, he learned something about love. Love can't always fix depression because depression is not a result of a lack of love; it is a mix-up of chemicals in the brain. Over time, he learned love couldn't fix his dad — because love doesn't have the power to fix everything. He said what love does have is endurance.

Remember the teaching of the Apostle: "Love believes all things. Love hopes all things. Love endures all things."⁴

I think that is what Jesus tells John. And you know, I think it worked. Somehow John found his courage again. He must have refocused his gaze and recognized that Jesus was not just his cousin, but was the power of God's love in the world. He never got out of that jail, but he died trusting that Jesus was the Promised One of God.

The truth is, God will not overthrow every evildoer in

this world. We won't escape every prison. Every day we see celebrations of moral smallness; mean-spirited, demeaning, condescending behavior. We see our neighbors belittled, and the world seems filled with anger and fear. It's disappointing. And that disappointment can overwhelm you.

But Jesus would urge us to look for the good. Jesus would urge us to look for the light — to pay attention to those places where the power of love is practiced. For there is where you will find the Spirit of God at work; there is where you will find glimpses of God's promised day breaking in.

And I know if that feels hard or even naive, then start by paying attention to others who are looking for the good ... like John the Baptist. He's the kind of man you would want to know.

Or Fred Rogers. All that time we thought he was teaching the children, and he was really teaching us.

Or Dr. Bob, who even on his hardest days, would remind us to "be of good cheer."

Or my young friend Matt, who learned early that love endures.

Or Stormy Shank, who faced heartbreak with joy.

Or Jackie Boggs, who never let a failing body rob her of her song of praise.

Or Caryl Herman ... or Toni Diehl ... or Julie Lee ... or Inez Simon ... or Bill Degen.

I could go on. You could too.

Look for the good, and if that is too hard, look to those around you who are looking for

the good, like John, that man who was the greatest of those born of women, but he was also shaken at times and disappointed. And it was because he was all of that, that we can trust him to be our teacher of courage and good cheer.

¹Heschel, *The Prophets* (1962), p. 24

²Anne Tyler, *Saint Maybe* (1991), p. 133

³This entire story is found in "What Love Can't Fix," by Matt Gaventa, *The Christian Century* (February 4, 2015), p. 10

⁴1 Corinthians 13:7

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.