

Matthew 11:2-24: Regarding John & “This Generation”

Introduction:

Friends,

Today’s message is a short one. Seriously, maybe one of the shorter ones I’ve ever given. We’re looking at a passage that isn’t too hard to understand. That said, though, it’s a passage that invites us to consider our expectations about God, about our lives, and the ways in which those expectations are met or go unmet. I generally think it’s a good idea to check in with these things, so. We’ll do that, after, of course, we allow this passage from Scripture to lead us there.

Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Let’s dive into this:

11:2&3: The Prophet’s Insecurity:

John the Baptist sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus if Jesus is the Messiah. “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” This is a reasonable question. John’s in prison, after all, for doing what God wanted him to do.

If Jesus really is the Messiah, shouldn't John the Baptist be free? I mean, shouldn't triumph and vindication be the result for John? Or if, then if Jesus really is the Messiah, shouldn't Jesus be in prison, too? I mean, John, who has been acting faithfully, ought to be where Jesus is right now, or Jesus ought to be where John is. They ought to be in the same place, if they're on the same team, the same side of God.

But of course, God achieves the restoration of the world in ways we don't expect, and if we really give ourselves to the causes of God, we may find ourselves in some sort of prison. And beyond this, our time line is not God's; Jesus will be where John is, he just isn't now.

John is insecure here, needing reassurance, wondering if the way things are reveal that God is at work, or if he's misreading the signs around him. And Jesus says to John's disciples, "Go back and tell John about what you've seen and heard."

And they've been seeing and hearing things. They are John's disciples, but they are following Jesus around, just...watching. Hearing. Taking note. We don't know too much about their perspective, their thoughts on things, but not long ago they sided with the Pharisees, interrupting Jesus' dinner at Matthew's house, and asking why Jesus and his followers don't do what they do. In that scene, it was John's disciples' expectations

that were going unmet; here, we see John's own expectations are going unmet, and he's wondering just what's going on. He's just wondering what's going on.

11:4-6:

So Jesus reminds John's disciples of what they've been seeing and hearing, what they ought to say to John when they return to him.

“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.”

This is all stuff the Messiah is supposed to do; this bit is promised. Jesus, at least, saw this as his way of being in the world, and we could talk about just how much of this John really expected; it may have been that what John expected was for the Messiah to be a little less “good news-”y and a little more “fire and brimstone”-y. Jesus struck the balance that he struck. But in saying this, Jesus is both reassuring and redirecting John.

He is saying, “Tell John about the ways it's working out, not the ways it's not working out.” And John, in your insecurity, hear this: **“Blessed is anyone who doesn't stumble on account of me.”**

On Stumbling:

John certainly didn't think, when the Messiah showed up, he would end up Jailed, leading his followers from prison. What Jesus says here is more than a fancy way of saying "Keep the faith."

It's not hard to give up faithfulness, you know? We slip into it, like we slip into any routine. Maybe this is only true if we've followed Jesus for a long time. Someday we wake up and realize, for one reason or another, that Jesus--and his people, and his traditions, and the way God works in this world--Jesus really has disappointed us. Our expectations have gone unmet.

We thought...whatever: We thought our present would be different than it is.

And we find out that Jesus isn't all the things we thought he is. This last point is the particularly hard point. Even the most faithful of us wants God to care about things the way we think God should care about things. We want God to do what we want God to do; not what God wants to do. And we have some ideas about how it should be done, too.

But it is dangerous, easy-to-stumble on ground when we begin to believe God has failed us, when in truth God has only--and thankfully--failed our selfish or idealized or simply wrong expectations of Him.

When Jesus reminds John “Blessed is the one who doesn’t stumble on account of me,” he is reminding John to take a fresh look at what God is revealing in Jesus, and if it is different than what John expected--so be it.

It’s John and his expectations that needs to change, not Jesus. That said, I don’t read Jesus’ words as anything but gentle, here. But they are truthful. John needs to step away from the stumbling ground, and leave some things behind him there.

On Stumbling & Asking Questions:

The miracle John reveals is that he asks Jesus a question. So often, when we find that things in our life aren’t working out the way we thought, we don’t ask questions. Or, we don’t ask them seriously, we don’t ask them ready to act on the answers that we receive.

John finds himself in a place he wouldn’t have expected, given the fact that the Messiah has shown up, and so he asks Jesus a question, and it’s a loaded question, because if Jesus isn’t the one who he’s been waiting for, then he’s veered off course in some great way. But if Jesus is the one who he has been waiting for, then he can take a deep breath and deal with the situation he’s in. He can deal with his expectations.

When we feel like God has failed us, or we feel uncertain if we are in the right place in life, or we

aren't sure why things are going the way they are, what we almost never do is take a deep breath and ask someone who can help us--God or some wise, faithful person who we trust. What we do is complain, maybe. Ask "Why?" without wanting an answer. Maybe we grieve, for a bit; I hope. But tears, lament, complaint: these things are meant to give way to peace, answer, resolution. If we find that our questions about why things are going the way they are going just leads us to perpetual confusion or bitterness, then we're asking the wrong questions, and what we need is help to ask better questions.

Or we withdraw, maybe, seeking space. This is fine, for awhile. But I can't count the number of people who, having questions about God, who wonder about why their lives are going the way they are going, retreat from the places where those questions can be best answered, withdraw from the church. We do this because it feels like we can't trust the answers the church might give us, which is a shame--but, if you have math questions, you go to a math expert. No one things that mathematicians have something to prove when it comes to complex addition, and yet we can't shake the feeling that the church is just out to prove the church's agenda, and convert us to a certainty we can't believe in.

John's question reveals a trust in Jesus in spite of any doubts it may reveal, because he trusts the answer

that Jesus gives him. And if we have questions about why our lives are going the way they are going, why God seems to be doing what God seems to be doing, then we also have to find someone who is a subject matter expert, and who we trust, someone wise and faithful who we can ask.

John's Role:

Jesus goes on from here to publicly praise his cousin John, to make sure John is seen as the faithful, honorable man he is. He reminds them that John is a prophet, and this is proven in their response to John.

But John is more than just a prophet, not that that's a small thing. He's the last prophet of an era, the final prophet of the time before Jesus, and as such, has both a special place of honor because of it, and he has had a special role as the one who prepared Jesus' way in the world, set him up for the Messiah work that he's called to do.

This Generation:

Jesus talks about "this generation," which surrounds him.

16 "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

17 "'We played the pipe for you,

***and you did not dance;
we sang a [funeral song],
and you did not mourn.'***

***18 For John came neither eating nor drinking,
and they say, 'He has a demon.' 19 The Son of
Man came eating and drinking, and they say,
'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax
collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved
right by her deeds."***

We've talked before, although not recently, I don't think, about the way "this generation" is shorthand, in the Old Testament, to describe people as sinful and godless.

He describes "this generation," the sinful, faithless people surrounding him as little kids who pout when Jesus, as the Messiah, doesn't do what they want him to do.

John began by doing what God wanted of him, and he's honored by Jesus when he shares his reasonable doubts. "This generation" around him starts from selfish expectations that Jesus--and John before him--should play the parts they think they should play.

Wisdom's Children:

When Jesus ends this section by saying "Wisdom is proved right by all her children," we're forced to ask if

we are wisdom's children.

Do we, like John start with God, voice our fears, and let go of our false expectations of God, Jesus, how our life is going. Or are we children of something else, and simply want people to behave the way we want them to behave, do what we want them to do, and keep whatever good in the status quo there is for ourselves.

Jesus is moved by the doubts of his cousin, and gently reminds John--and those of us who follow after him-- that we cannot give up Jesus as he really is for a version of Him that we've created or would rather have. It may be more comfortable for awhile, but it's a lie, and lies don't bring us hope when we're dying in prison.

Conclusion: Doubts

Doubt comes and goes. John understood, early on, that Jesus was the one he was waiting for. Earlier in Matthew he acknowledges Jesus' importance, he clearly declares his trust in Jesus, knows that Jesus' importance must increase even as his own must decrease.

And yet, something about how he himself "decreased," about the path his life had taken and where he found himself, caused him to question his earlier certainty.

There's nothing wrong with this; it's reasonable.

Where he goes with it, though, models health and faithfulness for us. Because he doesn't just hang out in uncertainty, as we people so often tend to do. He instead seeks wisdom from someone he trusted in order to get insight on his situation and correct his unmet expectations.

John paves the way for Jesus. He does the preparation work, lays a spiritual path that Jesus can and does follow. And he also paves the way for Jesus in other ways; he lives out what Jesus tells the Twelve they are going to experience when they follow him. He suffers the persecution and murder that Jesus will go on to suffer. And he paves the way for us, or at least, models for us best practices when it comes to doubt.

John needs reassured that he hasn't been abandoned, that his work hasn't been useless, in vain. He goes to Jesus with his questions, and Jesus answers him with a reminder of who he is, and encouragement to keep hoping and trusting despite his present circumstances. When we are faced with doubt of some kind, or are perplexed that our life is the way it is when we thought it would be different by now, then we have to do the same thing. We have to take our questions and unmet expectations to someone we can trust, a person who can give us the insight and wisdom we need. In the best case, we're able to take

these questions to God through prayer, leaning into Scripture and the Spirit as we do. At least let's take them to each other. If we allow doubts, questions, and unmet expectations to derail our pursuit of God, we will find ourselves without hope in something like a prison. I don't want that for us.