

St. Joseph of Arimathea

Episcopal Church

2172 Sawmill River Road

White Plains, Greenburg,

New York 10607

The Third Sunday of Advent (A)

December 15, 2019

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

DRAFT

“Really Real”

The Holy Gospel according to

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” 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? What then did you

go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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.’ 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.”

Lord, you see us as we are, poor, wretched, blind—please heal us, this day,

this season, this year, now and forever.

Amen.

The Rev. Daniel P. Matthews, Jr.,
Rector Emeritus of Trinity Church, Wall
Street, previously was the rector of St.
Luke's Episcopal Church in Atlanta, GA,
when he wrote:

My daughter Catie, who is in high
school, has a one-word question she uses
frequently. The one-word question is,
“Really?” It is normally said when life or
a friend suddenly foists upon her some
turn of events that seem woefully unfair

given all the hardship that she's already had to bear. She uses it when she's already had a lousy day and then she goes to lunch only to have a friend steal her dessert. “Really?” She uses on me when she has had a long day of school followed by cross country practice and then play practice and she walks in the front door, and I ask her, “Catie, would you be willing to empty the dish washer and take out the trash?” “Really?”

http://day1.org/2386-whats_the_plan

Is John the Baptist a prophet of God “really?” Jesus was answering that very question in our Gospel lesson.

Many decades ago, I visited my cousin Gaynor in Chattanooga, Tennessee; Gaynor would later become a very successful obstetrician/gynecologist after getting his BS and MD in only six years many years ago. We were great buddies, he and I, and when we got together, which was very rarely, since I lived over a hundred miles away, we would cook up some cockamainy plan or the other. I would be staying with my grandparents in downtown Chattanooga, Gaynor lived in the suburbs of Chattanooga in a town called Brainard. We discovered that my grandparents had an old writing pen and

some old dark turquoise ink, and immediately identified it as something like the color of currency, so we made some fake bills that looked like a monopoly-type money. It was so easy to make money that way, and we kids had absolutely no money to our name, so we relished in our newfound ‘wealth’. But of course, it was not at all real, nor did it look that real. But just the idea that we could just print money was what we laughed at. But one day things became really real: that day I was driven to Gaynor’s house by my parents so we could play together, but lo and behold, he had a neighborhood group

of buddies who had an ‘enemy’ neighborhood of ‘tough guys’ nearby. Gaynor’s buddies had a little hut that they had built that they called their fort, a few pieces of plywood loosely nailed together with a plywood roof: a scene I saw later in the television sitcom “Big Bang Theory” reminded me of it. In the Big Bang episodes, the Big Bang gang were young scientists who were completely clad in all sorts of body armor with face masks, and their weapons were paint ball guns—harmless, but a paintball would sting a bit when one was struck by the opponent’s paint ball. In the scene in the television

sitcom, I think it was the Geology Department who had pinned the Physics Department in this little cave like structure of the physicists. Well, in my actual story, Gaynor and I and his neighborhood buddies were pinned inside our fort by the ‘toughies’ who had actually BB guns and pellet guns, and we were ‘sore afraid’ because we had no weapons at all. And pellets and BB’s can do a bit more than sting. I remember being very worried about getting hit in the eye. I can’t remember if our ‘fort’ was actually struck by pellets and BB’s, but at least in our imagination we were ‘under fire’ and we

thought we could hear the discharge of the pellet guns and BB guns as the enemy menaced nearby; we were indeed pinned down, and we did not have anything to match their fearsome weaponry. We were, in a word, ‘sitting ducks.’ It was about the time that the Korean War had broken out, so warfare was distinctly on our minds, but our enemies were not North Koreans, they were simply the other neighborhood, the toughies. Somehow that group of boys finally got tired of shooting at our fort, they could not see us huddled inside scared to death, and their barrage ended, and they left, fortunately without rushing

our fort. We would have been easy targets. But the fear of war was definitively imprinted on my young mind. People really kill other people in war. That was a difficult concept for my young mind until I personally was pinned down by BB guns and pellet guns. Then war was real. Really.

Real death was what John the Baptist faced. He was locked up in prison by King Herod due to the anger of Herod's illegitimate wife stolen from one of Herod's brothers. Herod's adulterous marriage had been criticized by John the Baptist, and apparently at the insistence of

Herod's wife, John was arrested and thrown into Herod's prison, even though Herod himself greatly respected John as a prophet of God.

In that dank and dark prison cell in Jerusalem in around 24 AD, John the Baptist actually found his own mind turning to ultimate concerns of life and death perhaps more than ever. He may have sensed that his days on earth were drawing to a close in that terrifying cell of King Herod, and indeed history proved that was correct. Soon John would be beheaded. What will concern you at the end of your life? Will your faith be

enough to sustain you? John the Baptist began questioning what was the ultimate answer to his question of Who is the Messiah, really? What is he teaching us, really? and How will we know him, really? — three very big questions that even we need to concern ourselves with today. The answer to these key questions holds our fate and the fate of the world, really. How do we know in whom to have faith? Who is the Messiah? What is he teaching us? and How will we know him? We are only nine days from Christmas. Soon we will be affirming that everything that John and Jesus said is true, that Jesus

is the Son of God that takes away the sin of the world, baptizing us in the Holy Spirit. Are we really ready to do that? Merry X-mas, happy reindeer season, happy holidays, but sometimes we cower in our fort not willing to show our true colors as followers of the One sent by God to save the world, Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, in a stable, in Bethlehem, as Christ the Lord.

One father reported that his child asked, “Is Santa really working for Jesus?”

In the scene in our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus is affirming and extolling John for his greatness as a prophet of God.

Many are asking themselves now, is Christmas real? Is Christmas real. We have so many imagined angels, and imagined creche scenes, and plastic Santas, and blow up reindeer, and toy soldiers, it is difficult to find the real among the imagined. Imagination is good, to a point, but then it is when things get real that we realize where our faith comes from, and what our faith really does.

My friend Jim was healed through the efforts of a large number of people praying for his recovery following the discovery that he had an incurable stage of lymphoma—the cancer was in almost

every lymph gland in his entire body.

Jim's non-Christian physician would not himself believe the miracle had occurred, and he continued to examine Jim every month or so to try to find the lymphoma that had completely disappeared in a matter of weeks. That doctor's scientific background told him that Stage 4 lymphoma never went into remission. And that was probably correct, in the absence of prayer! But we who knew and loved Jim prayed for him day and night; there were quite a lot of us praying. We also were mobilized by Jim himself for our prayers at a later time when his daughter-

in-law had a large uterine mass that needed to be removed surgically. On the day of the surgery, the surgeon called for a final set of x-rays to determine the tumor's size and exact location, and, you guessed it, the tumor had completely disappeared!

Jim's doctor could not believe Jim could be healed. And the surgeon was mystified that the tumor in Jim's daughter-in-law had mysteriously disappeared. Both doctors could not believe what they could absolutely prove scientifically first hand.

Seeing is not believing, in other words. Nor is hearing believing, if we can refer to

the record about John the Baptist in John's gospel. If we do not want to see a miracle, if we do not want to believe a miracle can happen, then we can convince ourselves that it did not occur. We often cling more strongly to our disbelief than to our belief. It seems too spooky, too incredible, too disturbing of our quaint picture of how the world must and will work, every time, regardless. "Just the facts," as the fictional detective Jack Web of "Dragnet" would say; 'just the facts'. But in the realm of faith, 'just the facts' is not enough for some to believe in who Jesus is. And they

will continue to question whether God's healing can occur.

Another friend of mine found she had had a nearly life-long fungal infection of her blood, and it was increasing in severity and was becoming life threatening. She was treated at the Yale New Haven Medical Center without success. Again, her church friends prayed for her, and you guessed it, the infection suddenly and completely disappeared. However, this time her Yale doctor simply entered into her medical chart: "blood fungal infection disappeared following prayer." He was

more in tune with the idea of faith and healing than was Jim's doctor.

Our lives are lived in these areas of faith and unfaith. We position ourselves to be in one or the other camp, and we find it somewhat humorous or quaint to think about how people in the 'other camp' think about healing. There seems to be a vast chasm between the two groups of believers and disbelievers.

In a poem by Ann Weems entitled, "Kneeling in Bethlehem", the first line reads, "If there is no cross in the manger, There is no Christmas." If there is no cross in the manger, there is no Christmas.

Is there a cross in your manger,
something incurable, something
impossible to believe, something so big
that only God can fix it? Let God take
over, pray for God's guidance, and then let
God be God. That's when we find the true
meaning of Christmas.

Jesus came, Jesus died, our sins are
forgiven. That is the greatest miracle.
Believe it. Forgiveness is real, really real.

Amen.

Description: Reality is illusive, and during the Christmas season we are pushed to the brink by all sorts of things distracting us from the Word made Flesh, lying in the manger, who lived and died for us. That is true reality.

Tags: Jesus, Christ, Santa, reindeer, healing, real, God, Christmas, Advent, forgiveness, miracle, prayer, John, Baptist, Herod, prison, lymphoma, fungus, infection, war, Chattanooga, Atlanta, Trinity, Wall Street

These disciples of John the Baptist had indeed seen Jesus' mighty miraculous works, yet they were not disciples of Christ but were still disciples of John the Baptist. Their loyalties were to their imprisoned leader, John.

Our lives are lived in these areas of faith and unfaith. We position ourselves to be in one or the other camp, and we find it somewhat humorous or quaint to think about how people in the 'other camp' think about healing. There seems to be a vast chasm between the two groups of believers and disbelievers.

In my personal life, when I turned to prayer and church going in a serious way during my graduate school days, I found a great relief of having found something I had been searching for since my college days when the facts of my religious belief seemed to pail in the presence of scientific discovery and scientific fact, over laid with a new found interest in philosophy, when I learned, “I think, therefore I am”, an approach to life and being that seemed out of sync with my biblical and church learning about Jesus and his miracles and Moses and the parting of the Red Sea. All

that Sunday School stuff seemed to pail in the fact of “I think, therefore I am”, which seemed so logical to me at the time. But “I think, therefore I am” did not really relate to my day to day life which was bleak at the time. Thinking and feeling seemed so far apart. Have you experienced that sort of idea?

The challenge is to somehow connect our thinking life with our feeling life. In adolescence the separation of the two can become overwhelming for teenagers and young adults. We think. We do. We feel. But these three actions, thinking, doing, and feeling seem so disjointed and out of

sync. So in our adolescent state, we just do when we feel like doing, regardless of what our mind tells us about the facts and results of what we are doing. And we get into the mindset of ‘if it feels good, then it is good.’ Drug addiction becomes one of the results. Problem is that the feeling wears off, and then we are stuck into the trap of finding a way to get our pleasant feeling going again. And we get into a difficult to break loop in our lives. And the facts of addiction although known in our minds are overwhelmed by the feeling we think we need to remain in the addiction.

Faith becomes one victim of this vicious circle. We forget the grounding of our attitudes and behaviors that we learned in church or Sunday School as children, and the facts we learned there become lost in the myriad of other facts that flood over us. How do we feed ourselves? How do we feed our families? How can we pay off the mortgage? How can we find true love?

John the Baptist was a hermit, living in the desert on bugs and wild honey. For him, love was not something he was looking for, at least not love in an amorous way. John was a sort of monastic before

there were monastics. And the love of his life was apparently in getting others to become more like him, casting off the concerns of wealth and power, foreswearing luxurious clothing and trappings of wealth, and getting back to the basics of morality and clean living. John called it repentance. John told those who would listen to him to confess to God what was wrong in their life and to set a new course which would move away from their sinful pasts—no more extortion, give away your extra coat, share your food, be satisfied with your wages. John's was a

very prescriptive faith—do this, do that, to escape God’s wrath (Luke 3:10-14).

But this John Baptist sort of faith was so particular and specialized that it was difficult to generalize it to all people. Every sinner needs something unique to keep their way straight before God. However, in his heart John the Baptist knew there was something greater that needed to happen than him. The Messiah had to come. The One Sent from God, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world had to come to complete God’s promise to humanity. To save humanity from their sins, a new one had to appear,

and John knew that he was not worthy to even carry or unloose that one's sandals.

In today's Gospel, Jesus acknowledges the great value of John Baptist's teaching. Jesus calls John "more than a prophet". Jesus even says that among all humanity, John was the greatest, to that point. But then Jesus adds, 'yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John'. Jesus subtly introduces a whole new concept, the kingdom of heaven.

What is this "kingdom of heaven"? And how can we be a part of it? Jesus is indicating that the kingdom of heaven is

greater than anything that had happened before him.

And we hear Jesus explain in practical terms what this “kingdom of heaven” is like. He tells John the Baptist’s disciples to “Go and tell John the things which you hear and see:

The blind receive their sight,

the lame walk,

the lepers are cleansed,

the deaf hear,

the dead are raised up,

and the poor have good news preached to them.” (Matthew 11:4-5).

Jesus says, look at the facts. See the results of my new ministry in the world. See what is happening here and now. Things which had never happened before are now commonplace with me. Blind people suddenly can see. Lame people suddenly can walk. Lepers are healed. Deaf people are able to hear. Dead people come back to life. And the poor, those without hope of ever becoming rich or comfortable, they hear the good news that God has come to them to give them

encouragement and hope and abundant
life.

‘Jesus of Nazareth, without money or
arms,
conquered more millions than Alexander,
Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon;
without science and learning,
he shed more light on things human and
divine
than all the philosophers and scholars
combined;
without the eloquence of the school,

he spoke words of life such as were never
spoken before or since,
and produced effects which lie beyond the
reach of orator or poet,
without writing a single line,
he has set more pens in motion
and furnished themes for more sermons,
orations, discussions,
works of art, learned volumes and songs of
praise
than the whole army of great men of
ancient and modern times.

Born in a manger and crucified as a
malefactor,
he now controls the destinies of the
civilized world
and rules a spiritual empire which
embraces one third of the inhabitants of
the globe.'

<Philip Schaff, church historian>

Our Gospel lesson, verses 2-11,
emphasizes the healing, saving, and
empowering ministry of Jesus, which was

a surprise to those expecting a fiery, judgmental Messiah.

"yet he who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he" (v. 11b). "The issue here is not John's personal salvation, but his place in the scheme of salvation history" (France, 429). John stands at the pinnacle of the old era, but even the greatest representative of the old era is less than the humblest representative of the new. An appropriate metaphor is the ancient astronomer whose observations were limited by a small, primitive telescope. The most brilliant person, so

limited, could never match the work of a more ordinary person with access to today's space-based telescopes. And most have heard that our smart phones are more than ten times smarter than all the computing power used to put the first space man on the moon.

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We might think, "That was then, but this is now. Nobody would take offense at Jesus today." But that isn't true. People take offense at Jesus all the time. Across

the globe today, people are persecuting Jesus' followers:

In Kazakhtsan, Yklas Kabduakasov, a former Muslim, was arrested for his Christian activities. Initially sentenced to house arrest, a court more recently sentenced him to two years imprisonment in a labor camp.

http://www.persecution.com/public/newsroom.aspx?story_ID=%3d373939&featuredstory_ID=%3d353236

The Pew Research Center says that
“Christians face religious persecution in
more countries than any other religious
group.”

<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/christians.in.middle.east.facing.worst.persecution.as.population.drops.sharply/60044.htm>

Pope Francis labelled the persecution
of Christians TODAY as a form of
genocide.

Jesus says, “Blessed is he who finds no
occasion for stumbling in me.”

***** And it is not just in a few isolated places around the world that people are taking offense at Christ. Christmas has become increasingly secular in this nation as people take offense at any mention of Christ. Humorist Dave Barry, who lives in Miami, Florida, tells about Miami schools teaching kids to sing "Suzie Snowflake." Many Miami kids have never seen a snowflake. But in the public arena it is no longer permissible to sing Joy to the World and Silent Night, so public officials have reinterpreted Christmas to mean

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and
Suzie Snowflake.

Like Moses, John marched up to the
border of the promise without actually
entering it himself. He was Jesus'
forerunner—not his disciple.

If the least in the kingdom of heaven is
greater than John, consider where that
places us. We may be very ordinary
Christians, but God considers us to be
great.

Jesus says, “Blessed is he who finds no occasion for stumbling in me”

And then there is Michael Moore's 2004 map of the U.S. and Canada where the west coast and the upper Midwest are joined with Canada, and the rest of the U.S. is labeled “Jesusland”—Moore's way of mocking America and Jesus.

And Christians have been cultivating the kingdom for two thousand years. When John the Baptist expressed doubts, Jesus told John's disciples:

“Go and tell John the things which you hear and see:

The blind receive their sight,

the lame walk,

the lepers are cleansed,

the deaf hear,

the dead are raised up,

and the poor have good news preached to them” (11:4-5).

Those things are still happening today—all over the world. Men and women who

have become poor in spirit for Jesus are working all over the world today to bring healing—and education—and clean water—and Christ—to people in need. Lovers of Christ have left comfortable homes and promising careers to serve the world's least and helpless in the name of Christ. And the world is far better for their sacrifices.

Jesus says, “Blessed is he who finds no occasion for stumbling in me.” Blessed are we when we love the Lord. Blessed are our families. Blessed is our world. Because when Christ blesses us, he will

not allow us to enjoy our blessings in
isolation.

Jesus of Nazareth, without money or arms,
conquered more millions than Alexander,
Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon;
without science and learning,
he shed more light on things human and
divine
than all the philosophers and scholars
combined;
without the eloquence of the school,

he spoke words of life such as were never
spoken before or since,
and produced effects which lie beyond the
reach of orator or poet,
without writing a single line,
he has set more pens in motion
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than the whole army of great men of
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Born in a manger and crucified as a
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and rules a spiritual empire which
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Philip Schaff, church historian

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In the best sense of the word, Jesus was a radical....

His religion has so long been identified with conservatism...

that it is almost startling sometimes to remember

that all the conservatives of his own times were against him;

that it was the young, free, restless, sanguine, progressive part of the people who flocked to him.

Phillips Brooks, 19th century pastor

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2004, David E. Leininger:

John is in prison, a hellhole of a place – filthy, nasty, foul, dark. He had preached just one sermon too many, and this one mixed religion with politics, dangerous anytime. It seems that King Herod Antipas had taken up with his half-niece, Herodias, problem enough according to Jewish Law, but it seems she was already married to his own brother, making it all the worse. John was an old school kind of preacher and thundered that such ought not to be. Truth

be told, powerful people do not like to be challenged by powerful preaching, then or now. They ignore it if they can, but when the people start to listen in, they do what they can to silence it. Apparently, the people of Judea were listening (and probably laughing at the palace soap opera). So, John is in jail.

He has time to think. He remembers the high hopes he had about Jesus being the Messiah. He had been prepared for the revolution and would have been the first to volunteer to join Jesus' forces. But time went on...and on...and on. No call to

arms. In fact, the reports that had been coming in gave no clue that Jesus was thinking about overthrowing Caesar or Herod or anybody else. There were some intriguing stories of miraculous occurrences in places where Jesus was, but no revolution. The Messiah? The answer to our nation's prayers? Well, Jesus, if you are, understand that you are NOT what we prayed for.

No one knows how John got his question to his followers. After all, there were no modern niceties like Visiting Hours in ancient dungeons. But he did. They come

to Jesus and relay John's question: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"



With the help of some historical information, there is another way of understanding of Jesus' questions. For example, scholars tell us that the reference to a reed may be an allusion to Herod Antipas, who placed a reed on his coins.



One Hasidic story tells of a pious Jew who asked his rabbi, "For about forty years I have opened the door for Elijah every

Seder night, waiting for him to come, but he never does. What is the reason?”

The rabbi answered, “In your neighborhood there lives a very poor family with many children. Call on the man and propose to him that you and your family celebrate the next Passover at his house, and for this purpose provide him and his whole family with everything necessary for the eight days of Passover. Then on the Seder night Elijah will certainly come.”

The man did as the rabbi told him, but after Passover he came back and claimed that again he had waited in vain to see Elijah. The rabbi answered, “I know very well that Elijah came on the Seder night to the house of your poor neighbor. But, of course, you could not see him.” And the rabbi held a mirror before the face of the man and said, “Look, this was Elijah’s face that night.”

Which leads me to one last question: Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else? Are you the one? Are you the one?

> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Are You the One?” Mixed Blessings, (Cambridge MA ; Cowley Publications, 1998), p. 92 <

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<https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/matthew-11-2-11-are-you-the-one-leininger>

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2007, The Rev. Charles Hoffacker:

He is no longer in the world as he was in those days. He does not walk the streets of Port Huron as he did the streets of

Nazareth and Capernaum and Jerusalem. Now Jesus means for his presence to be apparent through those of us who belong to his body. He looks to us to fulfill his mission here in this world, here in this city. A non-negotiable part of his mission is this theme of the healing miracles, namely “Including the Excluded.”

2007, The Rev. Charles Hoffacker

<https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/matthew-11-2-11-including-the-excluded-hoffacker>

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<http://day1.org/1069->

[are you the one who is to come](#)

The Very Rev. Samuel G. Candler is Dean
of the Cathedral of St. Philip in the
Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta, GA:

December 16, 2007:

Jesus Christ did not come to those
people who had the details of his arrival
all worked out. He came to the blind, the
lame, the lepers, the deaf, the poor, the
dead. He came to the downtrodden. He

came in humility for the humble. He came for those who did not have it all worked out for themselves. He came for those who knew they needed Him. <>

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