

When the Preacher Is Depressed
Matthew 11:2-12
Isaiah 35.1-10

With the calendar showing a scant 13 days to Christmas, we get a phone call: THE PREACHER IS IN JAIL. Now, that would make the Dayton Daily News – front page. Ed Rhodes, our moderator and Ed Wingham, chair of Pastor Relations, would have to go my bail. You guys would do that, right? Listen, this is part of our story: JOHN THE BAPTIST, the preacher of Advent, IS IN JAIL.

John's disciples struggle with the news; all of them talking at once. "John's in jail. Have you heard?" "Herod locked John in jail." "I heard that he threw away the key." "My cousin, who lives in Jerusalem, tells me Herod's wife wants his head on a platter." "I heard she's the meanest woman in the Roman Empire. God bless her." No one knows what to do: the preacher is in jail.

John's disciples remember those early days when the whole region was singing John's praise. "What a great preacher." "Some folks claim he's the promised Messiah." "I went down to the River Jordan every day and counted all those people who came out to hear our preacher preach. "John baptized me. I will never forget it as long as I live."

John's in jail, worrying about his congregation, but even more disturbing he's depressed. John grew up in the wilderness, and now he is in Herod's hole-in-the ground. I bet, like Geronimo, the great Apache chief imprisoned at Fort Sill, he wore a trench in the dirt floor of that cell pacing back and forth. Prison is no place for a preacher like John.

Jail or not, something in us rebels at the idea of a depressed preacher. Truth is we often have unrealistic expectations of preachers. We shouldn't be surprised that depression among clergy is so high. An August *NY Times* article says, "Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many would change jobs if they could." A wise pastor once told me, "When the president makes a mistake, when Congress acts shamefully, there are people who will blame you because they know you and you answer your phone. They will say, "Preacher do something!" Don't let that throw you. Have some compassion. You are their pastor and they need to vent."

John the Baptist starts out preaching up a storm. After thirty years of wilderness training, John sweeps into town. Even Jesus was impressed: "What did you expect? "Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in palaces." John baptized Jesus, called him the Lamb of God, taking away the sins of the world. John expected a parade not a prison. And therein lies the trouble.

John's depression is related to his expectations. "Are you the one or should we look for another?" We understand. A wife says, "He's not the man I thought he was." A teacher says, "I'm so disappointed in your performance." A parent says, "I didn't spend \$30,000 a year for you to make D's?" Expectations, starting as wild dreams, can turn into nightmares. One of our presidents was elected because the image makers did a wonderful job, but in the process they oversold him. Before taking office this president told a newspaper editor that he feared "the exaggerated idea the people have conceived of me. They have a conviction that I'm some sort of superman. If some calamity should come upon the nation, I would be sacrificed to the unreasoning disappointment of a people who expected too much." The year was 1928 and the president was Herbert Hoover. The calamity was the Great Depression. It's a challenge to navigate between expecting too much and expecting too little. Expectations can be a devil.

Some Christians have a tendency to give up too soon. We count seconds and minutes; God counts centuries and eons. "Should we look for another?" Jesus has only been working for about two months when John sends his impatient word. We try to make Jesus be like us instead of allowing Jesus to make us like him. Secretly, I bet some of us expect more from God. After all we are faithful church members. Don't we come to church, give, sing, pray? Like Esau, we cry, "Father don't you have a blessing for me?" Expectations can get out of control and wreak havoc with our faith.

John expected an axe wielding Jesus, a burn it all to the ground Jesus; instead he got, "Rise take up your pallet and walk." He got, "Lazarus come forth." He got, "Go in peace. Your sins are forgiven." John couldn't have felt less powerful.

The ministry can feel so powerless. Some memories never leave me: A three year old boy dies from meningitis. A twenty-one year old college student stabbed to death. A sixteen-year-old girl dies while I'm holding her hand and praying for her healing. A thirty-eight year old multimillionaire commits suicide and his wife asks me, "Why did this happen? We had everything. Three beautiful children. A gorgeous home. All this money. Why, preacher, why?" I have always been helped by the words of a famous preacher, who in his first sermon after the death of his wife, said, "Some people tell me I should fling away my faith. Fling away to what?" Faith, if we will follow, can help us out of the prison of depression.

When expectations fail, we enter a danger zone. The 12th verse of Matthew 11 is not included in the lectionary reading for today. Let me read it because it is critical to understanding our predicament. **"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force."** Nothing is more dangerous than religious expectations gone astray. First thing you know, some Anglican named Darby is dreaming up Jesus rapturing the church and destroying the world – a violent scenario, a nasty perversion. The church is more likely to be ruptured than raptured.

When some people of faith are disappointed by poor results, they drop Jesus and take things into their own hands. The kingdom of heaven is vulnerable to human violence based on human impatience and lust for false power. The irony is that by taking the kingdom by violence, we destroy it. KJV of verse 12 reads: "The violent bear the kingdom away."

Coercion, force, intimidation, anger, guilt inducement – all these are church forms of violence. It is a form of violence to force our Christian convictions on people. Jesus has not called us to control Washington, D. C., but to renew it, save it, even. Jesus has not called us to be religious vigilantes bent on making sure that everybody who has it coming gets it.

Much that we call church has become a violent place. People pushing a certain reading of Scripture down our throats. I received an evaluation from a UD Life Long Learning student: "Dr Kennedy needs to believe in the rapture or he is going to hell." What disturbed my student so much? I taught that Jesus would come back the same way he came the first time. Not with an army but a choir of angels. Like the first time. Forgiving sin not fomenting revolution. Rapture is an extreme makeover of Jesus from lamb of God to warrior of destruction. Wrong.

Well, Jesus does have an answer for John. **"Go and tell John what you hear and see."** What about us? What are people hearing and seeing from the church today? In my mind's eye I saw a box filled with the words and deeds of what has become the fussing, fighting, feuding church of Jesus. Politics. A literal Bible. Women priests. Gay marriage. Abortion. The environment. Bearing weapons. Creationism against evolution. Bigotry. Immigration. Patriotism. I even found a seminary president raising sand about yoga. And at the bottom of the box, I found this old book. "There's a little dust on the cover, but

don't let that fool you about what's inside." In my mind's ear, an angel whispered, "Open the book and read what you find." "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." Let me repeat those last two claims: "The dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them." Perhaps the grouping of resurrection and good news for the poor mean that it will take a power as great as resurrection to get Americans to actually care for the poor.

The answer Jesus gives is the answer Isaiah gave before him: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." Wait for it. Work for it. Stick with the program.

The answer Jesus gives says that the kingdom is coming from a bunch of sinners with enough sense to repent not a bunch of holy people waving Bibles and passing legislation. Can't we get it through our heads and into our hearts that Jesus comes to the little people not the big shots. The poor not the rich. The weak not the strong. From time to time one or two finally get it, and take up the call of sacrificing, suffering, loving commitment. "Many are called, but few stick it out." The churches are filled with members, but disciples are few. First one, then another will act and their actions will signal the beginning of a great movement of renewal where the shelf life of selfishness expires, and the strangle hold of greed on the American psyche will be broken. Scattered across the stories of the New Testament are examples of those who got it: "You are the Christ the Son of the living God." "Lord, half my goods I give to the poor." "I once was blind, now I see."

We have all these expectations and we have Jesus. I'm saying, stick with Jesus and his way: The dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them. Stick with Jesus; jail or no jail; job or no job; health or sickness; young or old; pain or pleasure. Stick with Jesus. Now, where did we put that cross?