

Sermon 11 December 2022, Advent 3

A story is told in The Autobiography of Ms. Jane Pitman. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is a 1971 novel by Ernest J. Gaines. The story depicts the struggles of African Americans as seen through the eyes of the narrator, a woman named Jane Pittman. She tells of the major events of her life from the time she was a young slave girl in the American South at the end of the Civil War. She recollects that when a child was born on the plantation, the proud parents, within hours of its birth, would bundle the newborn and bring the baby to Ms. Pitman's cabin. The parents would place the baby on her lap, and Ms. Pitman would say to the parents, "Name this child." When the parents spoke the child's name for the first time, she would raise the child toward heaven and speak the child's name to God, adding the great African prayer, "Behold, the only thing greater than yourself."

Then, Ms. Pitman would cuddle the baby, whispering into the child's ear, "Is You da One? Is You da One, chile, who will lead our people out of the darkness of bondage into the bright new day of freedom? Is You da One?"

Although Ms. Jane Pitman was a fictitious character, the hope expressed by her character was quite real. John the Baptist found himself asking this very question in prison as he heard about some of the things that Jesus was saying, he was thinking "is he the one?" He was beginning to have his doubts.

Few know blindness so profoundly as prisoners who once could see the whole world but now find the universe shrunk to the size of a cell. Such was John's plight now that Herod had locked him up so as to silence the noisy prophet's tongue. As the days dragged on, perhaps John could see only that he would never escape.

Despite the isolation, rumors from outside reached John. The Coming One he'd baptized and boldly proclaimed had begun to make his move. Soon would come the smiting of evildoers. Judgment on the threshing floor would surely commence. But the news that filtered into prison didn't have the sound John expected. Jesus was saying things like, "See, I send you out like sheep into the midst of wolves. . . . They will hand you over to councils. . . and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. . . . Do not fear those who kill the body. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (Matt. 10:16-31).

And yet, the sparrows do fall. John would soon be among them. Had John baptized the Messiah for this? Would this Jesus prove his preaching wrong?

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?" [Matthew 11:2-3](#)

Think about it. Here's John, the bold prophet who pointed to Jesus as the One, who called for repentance and baptized many, and who now sits in Herod's prison. It must have been lonely, dirty, smelly and damp and difficult being imprisoned in first century Judea. Who knows if there were exercise yards. What was available to John was time—time to think, time to ponder, time to second-guess, and time to doubt. Was Jesus the One? Was he the real thing? Had John been right, or had his work been in vain?

As John languishes in prison at Herod's command he knows there is no hope in Herod. But is God keeping God's promise? What has happened to the glorious

vision of Isaiah, where the eyes of the blind are opened, the deaf are unstopped, the lame leap and the tongue of the dumb sings for joy? What about his own bold proclamation of the coming of the messiah? We don't know exactly what provokes John's question to Jesus, but this faithful prophet, who once recognized that he needed to be baptized by Jesus, is now face-to-face with his doubts and disappointments.

When Jesus responds to John by asking his disciples to tell what they see and hear, and to dare to hold that alongside the promises of Isaiah, he leaves out the part of Isaiah 61 that refers to the prisoners being freed. Can John recognize in what his disciples see and hear that this is indeed the messiah, even if he does not set this particular prisoner free? Can John be trusted not to take offense at this messiah? After all, Jeremiah was rescued from a well. Why not John from a prison?

Doubt is nothing new; it is as old as human history. Even the most faithful disciples have experienced their dark nights of the soul and their seasons of doubt. I think about Mother Teresa, Martin Luther, Thomas, and so many other pillars of faith who wrestled with doubt, lived with it, expressed it, and yet did not let it consume them.

John the Baptist did not choose to wallow in his doubt or let it sour and disillusion him, at least not according to Matthew's account. He sent word by his disciples to Jesus and asked him directly. The answer he received is as clear as primary schools show and tell experience. "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" (11:4-5). Jesus meets

John's questioning and doubt directly. There are no heavy theological treatises or condemnation of his doubt handed down. Not at all! Jesus provides the answer through the witness of his disciples.

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During this season of waiting, anticipation, and expectation we should remember that not everyone shares our enthusiasm for Christmas, much less Advent. There are many who doubt, many who do not believe. Why any rational person could believe a tiny, helpless infant could be savior of the world is beyond them. In their eyes Santa Claus has more credibility than Jesus Christ. How can they **know** if no one **tells** them? How can they **see** if no one **shows** them?

It is so easy to keep our focus within the church walls as we light our candles, sing beloved hymns, hang the decorations on the Christmas tree, and practice those traditions which we hold near and dear while the world outside our hallowed walls swirls on, filled with despair and disbelief, stumbling in the darkness. The call to us

is the same as it was to John and to the weary people to whom the prophet Isaiah described God's coming among us. We are to be agents of this advent, stewards of this good news, and active participants in ushering in God's righteous reign.

We are charged with telling the world that something new is happening, just as the prophet did so long ago. "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God" ([Isaiah 35:3-4a](#)). These words are for our time, too.

Yes, the season calls for us to wait in joyful expectation; of that there is no doubt. Yet that waiting and watching and looking is not to be static. We are to wait as look out at our washing for the impending rain. We are to wait as a waiter waits on tables, constantly active, moving, looking, anticipating, hoping. We are called to go into the world, strengthened by the Word, bread, and wine, to tell all people that Jesus comes, that hope abounds, and that there is a place at the table and in the community just for them. Even as we wait, salvation breaks in around us, and God is active in the world. What good news! Go and tell; better yet, go and show and tell.