

# Uncertain. Certain.

God of the burning sand and thirsty ground: you called John into the wilderness to announce a new creation far from palaces of royal power; make us ready for your intensity, the judgment that opens our senses to the poverty of our world and calls to life what lingers in death; through Jesus Christ, the one who is and is to come. Amen.

*A Collect for Advent 3A, Prayers for an Inclusive Church, page 2*

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## THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 35:1-10, Psalm 146:4-9, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11 (Advent 3A)

December 11, 2016

## ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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### THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 3:1-12

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."

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What happens when we're boxed in?

In the reading from the third chapter of Matthew's gospel that we've just heard, John the Baptist is boxed in. He is no longer the wild and free voice of one crying out in the wilderness that we heard last week, the one surrounded by "the people of Jerusalem and all Judea."

He is alone in prison.

And his confident, clarion voice no longer makes declarations.

Now, he asks questions.

And his questions, like those of his followers, say: "I didn't think it was going to be like this...."

In this case, John thought the messiah would be different than Jesus. (Sort of like seeing Tom Cruise in person; the action hero is a pipsqueak.)

The situation is one we have experienced throughout life, certainly in our lives of faith – and one that will continue to confront us – personally, as a faith community, in all human community.

We get boxed in – either literally – like John in prison – or internally, in our thoughts, our conversation, in what we're doing (sometimes compulsively), in our souls.

Or all of the above... *and* all of the

above.

And we wonder what life is about, what God is about, what we should be thinking or feeling or doing when we're dealing with illness or death or some setback – something that didn't work out like we hoped it would (or like we needed it to), something that didn't last – or needs to be done all over again.

And like the Jewish people wanted a powerful Messiah to lead them to triumph over their foes – to rout the occupying Romans or whatever other national group was oppressing them, we want a magical God, a magical Jesus to make our pain or circumstances go away....

But in this encounter of Jesus with John the Baptist's disciples, the message is: "we aren't seeing it – not in you."

And Jesus points to a question we face in similar circumstances – when the magic isn't there: what are we looking for?

Our expectations can blind us to reality – to what really is.

What is really going on?

What is at the heart of the matter?  
At the heart of life?

No matter the Messiah we wanted, Jesus is the Messiah we got – not a magician to levitate us out of our boxes, our uncertainty, out of our pain, confusion, struggle, loneliness and fear – but one who accompanies us in them, who travels with us through them – in flesh and blood (sometimes our own and sometimes in other people – again, often not the people we expected or even wanted).

Fr. Richard Rohr writes: "You and I are here for just a few decades, dancing on the stage of life, perhaps taking our autonomous self far too seriously. That little and clearly imperfect self just cannot believe it could be a child of God. I hope the Gospel frees you to live inside

of a life that is larger than you and cannot be taken from you. It is the very life of God which cannot be destroyed."

He says: "By God's love, mercy, and grace, we are already the Body of Christ: the one universal body that has existed since the beginning of time."

And that is probably the last place we expected to see "the Messiah."

Almost always we expect to see God "over there." Someplace else.

Almost never do we realize that we are *in* God – all the time, wherever we are, whatever the circumstances, whoever is with us (or not).

Advent is a season of awakening, of awareness, of light shining in the darkness.

It disrupts our expectations – sometimes raising questions, sometimes rattling, upsetting our uncertainties.

At the heart of the Christmas story is the fact that no one *expected* God to come into the world in a human baby, in poverty, in the blood and mess and precariousness of birth to a human mother, in an occupied land and with an unclear future.

As the cross eventually underscores, it is not the circumstances – like John in the wilderness or John in prison – that make the difference. God is not enshrined in the conventional – as much as we make idols of our prejudices...

What truly matters is God with us (our being *in* God) in the disappointment, darkness, depression – what God promises in one whose name means exactly that: Emmanuel: God is with us.

Jesus born, crucified and resurrected as Christ and thus revealing God in all things, in all reality, (and all reality – including us – in God) is our true confidence, our life, and, yes, our joy.