

1 Gaudete – Matthew 11

John the Baptist knew why Jesus had come. He preached about him. He told his disciples, “He must increase, and I must decrease.” There was no doubt in John’s mind about who Jesus was. His faith was strong. There has arisen no one born of woman who is greater than John the Baptist in faith, love for God and his Word, and zeal for the truth. But John was in prison, waiting for Jesus to do what the Scriptures said he would do. When would every valley be lifted? When would every mountain be made low? When was he going to gather his wheat into his barn and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire? When was Jesus going to bring the judgment?

This is what John had prophesied. This is what was foretold by the prophets who went before him. The Anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ would come to bring judgment. And in this judgment he would rescue those who trust in him. He would bind up the broken hearted. He would release the captives from prison. But where was John? He was in prison. John knew who Jesus was. No one knew better than John. No prophet had seen what John had seen. No one was greater.

John received visits from his disciples whom he would no doubt continue to instruct in the truth about Jesus. But there was one thing, which was unmistakable. The prison bars and the dark cell were constantly surrounding him. What he had foretold to his own disciples was what he was presently experiencing. He was decreasing so that the Lord would increase.

Let me ask you something. How strong is your faith? It wasn’t as strong as John’s faith, I’ll tell you that much. Jesus tells us very plainly: “I tell you the truth, there never has appeared a woman’s son greater than John the Baptizer.” How strong is your faith? Is it so strong that it can survive even a day without hearing the gospel? Is it so strong that it can survive even one week without Jesus giving you his body and blood and hearing these sweet words from him, “Given and shed for you for the remission of sins?”

In a sense, our faith is greater than John’s faith. Not that it is more resilient or confident. No, John remains the greatest example of this for generations of Christians. Instead, our faith can be considered greater in this sense: What John was waiting for we presently have. St. Peter says this about all the prophets. He writes in his first epistle:

The prophets, who long ago wrote about what God’s grace would do for you, made a thorough search to learn all about this salvation. 11 They tried to find out Whom and what time the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing out when He exactly predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. 12 God told them they were not serving themselves but you in these things. And now the Holy Spirit, sent from heaven, had men, telling you the good news, announcing to you these things the angels long to look into. (1 Pet 1:10-12)

The faith of John the Baptist rested on the same thing all the prophets rested on. It rested on the Spirit of Christ, on his Word. And this Word has been fulfilled for us. So as Peter says in his second epistle, “Now we have the prophetic Word confirmed.” What John waited for with a burning faith you now have, fulfilled in Christ.

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So how strong is your faith? Is it so strong that you can follow the patterns of this world while still believing in Jesus? Is it so strong that you can hold onto a grudge against your brother while still calling God your Father? Is it so strong that you can look out for your own interests, lust after empty and wicked things, and remain anxious about getting as many earthly pleasures as possible all while reciting the words of the Psalm, “The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want”?

Faith is not the resilience and confidence of our own spiritual sincerity. Faith is, rather, that true confidence of the heart, which comes only from the Word of our Savior. It rests on nothing else than the Word of Christ. It looks to nothing else than to his innocent life, blood, and righteousness. Faith is not great in itself. Faith is great only in its object. It’s great only in its source – the promise of God through his Son, Jesus Christ.

So how strong was John’s faith? Wasn’t it strong enough that he didn’t need to hear from Jesus that he is the one who was to come? After all, he already knew this. He taught this. But here is the point. Faith isn’t merely a knowledge of the facts. Even the demons know who God is, yet they tremble. A faith that no longer needs to hear the preaching of Jesus is no faith at all. Unless faith is continually thirsting for everything Jesus promises by his Holy Spirit – in the preaching of his Word, in his body and blood, in the absolution, in the regular conversations and encouragements of fellow Christians – then it is a very weak faith.

John’s faith was strong. But this was only because of its object. John knew who Jesus was. But he also knew his own sinful flesh. The flesh is always doubting. Especially when persecution comes, the flesh doubts. It denies. It grows cold. And this is why the flesh must die. In fact, this is why God sends trials and persecutions. It is to prove to us that we cannot put any confidence in our own flesh. He lets us see how wicked the world is so that we would learn from experience how vain it is to put any trust in the strength of man.

John sat in prison. Of course, the Word of God was in his mind and heart. Even while he was sleeping God’s Word was sustaining him. This, by the way, is why we spend so much time memorizing portions of Scripture as well as hymns. Because when times of testing come, you don’t know if you will have a Bible close at hand. You don’t know if you will have a faithful church to attend. The Word of God continues to remain with us even after we hear it. And this is a comfort. God doesn’t call us to sit in church all day every day or even to sit and read our Bible all day every day. He gives us other duties in this life. But his Word continues to sustain us as we walk in the works he has prepared for us. His Word is meant to echo in our minds and conversations. This is called meditation. It is the Holy Spirit’s way of applying his Word to every part of your life by teaching you to consider it at every step of the way. Someone steals from you. This brings to mind the 7th Commandment and how Jesus gave up all he had in order to give you all heavenly treasures. Someone insults you, and this brings to mind that Jesus bore insults while he died for your sins. You realize that you have been thinking about something in a selfish and worldly way, and you think about what the Bible says about repentance, that it is the turning of your mind away from your sinful desires and toward God’s good promise in Christ.

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This is all called meditation. It is the Word of God active in your heart and mind throughout your daily callings in life. John would have meditated while he was in prison. He would have thought about what the prophets foretold about the coming Christ. He would have considered the Word God gave him to proclaim. But John knew that he couldn't survive only on his personal meditations and devotions. His faith was being tried. He was cold, hungry, and alone. So he did what faith always does. He went to the source of his faith. He sent for Jesus.

John had Baptized Jesus in the Jordan. But remember what John said when Jesus came to be baptized by him? He said, "I need to be baptized by you!" John was right. John needed to be fed by Jesus. John needed forgiveness of sins from Jesus. And he needed the constant assurance of this salvation found only in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. So as he decreased, as he faced his own mortality, he needed to hear the Word of his Savior preached to him. He needed to hear from Jesus himself the answer to this question: "Are you the Coming One, or should we look for another?" Therefore, as a good teacher, he sent his disciples to Jesus. But as an even better student, he heard the Word of Jesus proclaimed through them.

Jesus pointed John back to the Scriptures. The Scriptures said that the Coming One would heal the deaf, the blind, and the crippled. He would cleanse lepers and raise the dead. These were the very things Jesus was doing. Now, the Old Testament had recorded the raising of the dead through the prophets Elijah and Elisha, through whom God also cleansed Naaman of his leprosy. The people in the wilderness who were crippled by the poison of snakes were healed when they looked at the bronze serpent Moses lifted up on a pole. But at no time had any of these things happened at such a great rate. And at no time had anyone ever heard of the deaf given back their hearing or the blind given back their sight. These miracles of Jesus were sure signs not only that he was a great and powerful man but that he is the very fulfillment of the prophets. He is the Lord himself who told us he was coming. John needed to hear this just as much as his disciples needed to hear it.

John wasn't a flaky politician who changed his tune with the concert of the crowd. He wasn't swayed by the various winds of doctrine floating around. He was content to live the life God had given him in the wilderness, not with cozy clothes to meet the trending fashion of the day, not with luxuries of toilets and showers, heating and cooling. In lacking such things, he was free. He remains a great example to us of such freedom.

This is why God gave us John. He even foretold his coming through his prophets, Isaiah and Malachi. God gave us John in order to prepare our hearts for what makes faith so great. He gave us John as an example of one who doesn't need anything in this world except to know Christ. There is no one born of woman who is greater than John. But even the least in the kingdom are greater than he is. These are the poor in spirit who have the good news preached to them. Those who see their lost condition and feel the pressing load of sin are exalted and strengthened in their faith through the Word and sacrament where Jesus enters on his mission to heal the sin-sick heart within. All grief must flee before his face, and joy divine shall take its place. Amen.