

The Third Sunday in Advent

Text: Luke 7:18-28 (NIV)

¹⁸John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, ¹⁹he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" ²⁰When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" ²¹At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. ²²So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind



receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ²³Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." ²⁴After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ²⁵If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. ²⁶But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. ²⁸I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

Theme: Blessed Is the One who Does not Stumble

Have you ever had a time when it seemed as though everyone else in the world was happy and blessed by the Lord except you. You tried to do what was right. You trusted firmly in God through thick and thin, and yet it almost seems as though God forgot you when He was handing out the blessings in life.

That must be how John felt in our text. At this time so many people were rejoicing in the deliverance that Jesus was bringing, while John was languishing in prison. At such times it is tempting to stumble in our faith, but our Lord tells us that those people are blessed who do not stumble from their faith in Him in such times.

I. This story is surrounded by others where people are receiving God's deliverance.

There are three striking stories. I often say that salvation means three things: the forgiveness of our sins, God's promise of deliverance from evil, and eternal life with our Lord. Martin Luther writes about these things in the second part of His explanation to baptism. This chapter begins with the centurion's servant who was healed. The man was about to die, and without even going to the house, the Lord healed the servant. Soon afterward Jesus went to a town called Nain. As He was entering

the town, a funeral procession was leaving town. The dead man was the only son of a widow. Jesus' heart went out to his mother. He said, "*Don't cry.*" Then he raised the young man from the dead. After the story about John, Jesus was at the home of a pharisee when a woman who had led a sinful life came and anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Jesus told her, "*Your sins are forgiven.*" Our Lord brought so much joy to each of these people with His deliverance from sin, death, and the devil.

In the midst of that we have the story of John in prison. He had boldly proclaimed to the king that it was not right that he took his brother's wife. When the prophet Nathan confronted King David with his sins of adultery and murder, the king confessed, "*I have sinned against the Lord.*" Even wicked King Ahab repented by tearing his cloths and putting on sackcloth after the prophet Elijah told him, "*Have you not murdered [Naboth] and seized his property?*" (1 Kings 21:19) But Herod didn't repent. He had the prophet arrested and put away in a dark dungeon. We see just how wicked Herod was when he had John beheaded because of a drunken oath.

But now the same man who boldly preached a baptism of repentance to everyone, even to the religious leaders and the king. This man who pointed to Jesus and declared, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,*" was having some doubts. He sent two of his disciples to Jesus with the question, "*Are you the one who is to come or shall we wait for another?*"

But John was in good company with these doubts. After Pharaoh increased the workload of the Israelite slaves, Moses prayed, "*Ever since, I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and You have not rescued your people at all.*" (Ex 5:23) After Elijah won the contest against the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, he had to run for his life. He complained to God, "*The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down Your altars, and put Your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left,. And now they are trying to kill me too.*" Even Job complained, "*His hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.*" (Job 23:1) The Bible is full of examples of great men of faith who in the midst of great trials questioned God. Jeremiah even cried out, "*Cursed is the day I was born.*"

There are times when people today have those same doubts. Our hearts go out to those families in Connecticut. This should be a happy time of year for first graders. They have been looking forward to presents. Their parents have been busy buying them. Grandparents couldn't wait to see their grandchildren. While so many families are celebrating God's gift of a Savior at this time of year, these families and that town will be scarred every Christmas from now on. What happened there is as horrible as the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem by this King Herod's father. There is no greater grief in this world than the loss of a child, and it is even worse when it happens in such a monstrous way.

The Christmas season is a difficult time for many people. When we are lonely, it hurts when we see others gather with family and friends. When times are tough, we wish that we could give our kids more. When someone we love recently died, Christmas is one of the hardest days. When we are going through hard times at Christmas, we know just what John was going through when he began to have his doubts.

III. But Christ reassures us in the midst of those doubts.

It is significant that John went to Jesus when he was having these doubts. It is also significant that whenever we have a horrible tragedy, the place where people run is not to counselors or psychologists. They go to church. As a nation we did that on September 11, 2001. My guess is that there were more people in Church that day than on any Christmas Day. On Friday evening the churches of Newtown were full of people seeking peace in the midst of that horrific event. As Christian we go on our knees in prayer at such times. Like Jacob and the men I mentioned before we even wrest with God. We seek His Word, and we long for His Supper.

Jesus reassured the messengers that John sent to Him. He told John to look around and see how He was beginning to destroy the works of the devil in this world. He also added these words, *“Among those born of women, none is greater than John the Baptist.”* John’s work was not in vain. It really did prepare the way for the Lord. In a short time, John would be beheaded, but at that point God’s angels would carry Him to our Lord’s glory in heaven. He would be given his eternal rest and victory. Acts 12 tells us of the end of Herod. It says that an angel of God struck him. He was eaten by worms and died, but the word of God continued to spread. (Acts 12:23) Through thick and thin our Lord was with John every step of the way until He called him to His glory.

In those difficult days our Lord also gives us the peace that passes all understanding. We preach Christ crucified and in His supper we proclaim His death for us. God reminds us that if He loved us so much so give His own Son for us, will He not along with Him graciously give us all things. As Christians we have been baptized into Christ. We belong to Him, and He will never leave us or forsake us. In those times when we are weak, He reminds us that He is our strength. He is ruling all things from the right hand of His Father for our eternal good. Because He lives, we know that we will live also. Throughout the years, I have ministered to hundreds of people in their dying hour. It would be foolish for me to give them a false hope that they will soon get better. I assure them that because God has forgiven all of their sins, they can be sure that they are about to receive the eternal victory. When we are going through those difficult times, it is also good to look back and remember how God has been there for us in the past. His love that was with us back then will be with us until He calls us to His glory. Our Lord comes to us with the compassion He gave to all the people in this chapter when He told the widow, *“Don’t cry”* when He said of the Centurion, *“I have not found such great faith even in Israel,”* or when He told the woman who anointed Him with oil, *“Your faith has saved you, Go in peace.”*

In those days when your world seems to be falling apart, don’t stumble over Jesus. Run to Him! Cling to Him! Like John, the other people in this chapter, and millions of people throughout the centuries, He will fill you with that peace that passes all understanding.

Amen.

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