

# Sermon for Sunday, December 11, 2022

Third Sunday of Advent

“The Uncontainable Word of God”

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Decorah, Iowa

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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing ... That phrase has captured my imagination this week. Fiery John the Baptist is in prison! The one who showed that change is possible, that God is still active - he's in prison? But he inspires such hope!

When John first cries out, “Repent, the kingdom of God has come near”, his call resonates throughout the land. People feel deep in their bones that yes, now is the time for change. *Maybe now we'll be freed from the Roman Empire, from Rome's puppet king, Herod. Maybe now God will act. We will turn from despair and apathy and our narrow focus on ourselves. We will hope in God once again.*

All of Jerusalem goes out to be baptized. It's a mass demonstration of repentance, hopefulness, and resistance. Then, John even calls Herod to repent! He speaks truth to power after Herod married his own brother's wife. The town buzzes with anticipation. *Things are really going to change now!* But Herod doesn't repent. He sends John to prison. The talk of the town changes abruptly. Herod captures the news cycle yet again. Hope is held captive by injustice, yet again. Despair and defeat press in, yet again.

What presses in upon you these days?

What constricts your life, your hope?

What limits your capacity to resist the forces of evil and injustice?

Herod controls John and dominates the news cycle. Yet still in prison, John hears what the Messiah is doing. Word gets to John. Or rather, THE Word, the Word of God, reaches John. There is a power at work that Herod cannot contain. The Word of God gets into very unlikely places. It reaches into this sanctuary, into our homes and our hearts. It speaks into prison cells and even into wombs.

Earlier in his life, when John is safely contained in his mother Elizabeth's womb, the Word reaches him there. A pregnant Elizabeth is greeted by her cousin Mary, who is newly pregnant with Jesus, the Word of God. As Elizabeth hears the greeting, the child in her womb leaps for joy, leaps in recognition that the Word of God is alive and active.

Later, in prison, John finds himself in a very different enclosure. He won't emerge from this one into life, as when he left the safe confines of his mother's womb. Instead, this enclosure will lead to his death at a gruesome dinner party. Yet even when things look bleakest, especially when things look bleakest, the Word is alive, active. John hears what the Messiah is doing. What wedge of hope,

freedom, possibility this news must have stirred in John? What chains fell away? What light gathered there in his cell?

Still, he has questions. Of course, he has questions. And he persists in asking them. Even in a deadly confinement, John persists in listening, looking, and preparing. Even in his enforced enclosure, John turns to Jesus to seek and inquire. Jesus responds, tell John what you hear and see. Tell him: The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are made whole, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. The Word of God is alive, active. I wonder if John leaps for joy, once again, when he hears this news.

Today the Word of God reaches out to us, to you to open up hope, freedom, possibility. The forces of this world may still hold sway. The powers of injustice and oppression may dominate the headlines and the dinner parties. Evil may persist in controlling and even destroying lives. Yet there is another power at work. The Word of God is on the loose. It cannot be contained. It may be easier to recognize the Word in times of joyful anticipation when we are expecting new life. When it feels like hope is being born, then we easily join John in leaping for joy - well, within our hearts at least.

Yet even when hope is held captive, especially when hope is held captive, the Word of God is alive and active. The Word disrupts the power of fear and despair, constriction, sin, apathy, even death. The Word opens our eyes, makes us whole, raises us from death again and again so that we may be good news for the world. The Word calls us to turn our attention beyond our own walls, beyond imposed limits. The Word calls us to listen, look, prepare, seek, inquire. When all that feels difficult, know that the Word is always reaching out to you so that you may hear and see past what presses in upon you, so that you may know hope no matter the circumstance, so that you may share hope.

The Word of God gets into very unlikely places. Today it meets you through YouTube. It meets you in bread and wine, song and promise, and the gathered community.

See and hear. Go and tell.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.