



**“Are You the One?”**  
**Scripture – Matthew 11:2-6**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, March 3, 2024**

Have you ever thought you were losing your faith? Ever question whether God is really there for you when you lose someone you love or when the pressures of life threaten to crush you?

Surely, all of us have despaired when evil thrives and goodness is thwarted. Do you ever wonder why God does not put an end to the madness in the world? I cannot imagine what the Christians and Muslims in Gaza must be thinking now that the death toll has surpassed 30,000; the majority of whom are women and children.

Perhaps you can personally identify with John the Baptist’s desperate plea: Jesus, are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

John the Baptist was a colorful character who never gave a second thought to the public’s perception of him. An unconventional man, he seemed unaware of the ambiguities of life. Nothing fell into a gray area for John; people were good or evil, righteous, or wicked. And in his mind, most were firmly positioned on the wrong side of the ledger.

As a restless man on fire for God, his passion made him both attractive and offensive. John was a blazing orator who called some of the most devout people of his day “a brood of vipers” and mocked them with sarcasm. He told people what they did not want to hear about themselves and threatened them with damnation. “Change your life,” John bellowed, “before it’s too late.”

You might expect people to simply change the channel and ignore him, but his words resonated deep in their bones, so they ventured out into the wilderness to hear him preach. John could not be confined to a community, so he lived in the wild. He wore rugged outdoor clothing and ate natural foods centuries before it became fashionable.

John was a prophet who believed his role was to sound the alarm. He warned people to wake from their stupor because the Messiah was about to appear. Then, one day, while baptizing people in the Jordan

River, he found himself standing face to face with Jesus. It was one of the few occasions when John was nearly speechless.

After that day in the Jordan, the ministry of Jesus began to flourish, but John did not retire to write his memoirs. He continued to blare his blunt rhetoric until it landed him in peril. Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, became enthralled with his brother's wife. Obsessed with having her for himself, Herod lured her away from his brother and married her.

John could not hold his tongue and rebuked Herod publicly. Everyone knew it was true, but only John had the backbone, or the lack of common sense – your choice – to reprimand the ruler of Galilee. For his candor, John was thrown into prison. It was not unlike what we have seen in Russia where Alexei Navalny dared to speak out against Vladimir Putin.

Can you imagine how tormenting confinement to a dank prison cell would be for someone like John the Baptist who thrived in the wide-open wilderness? He would have had to summon every spiritual resource to endure imprisonment.

However, as the days dragged on and his health deteriorated, he experienced a dark night of the soul. When life is cruel it is only natural to question if God really cares.

As the days turned into weeks, he wondered why evil was triumphing and Jesus had not liberated him. Doubt began to creep its way into his mind.

John the Baptist had believed that God had commissioned him to prepare the way for the Messiah, and he was firm in his conviction that Jesus was the long-awaited one. But wasting away behind prison bars his confidence wavered.

When something we firmly believe suddenly seems dubious, the ground beneath our feet wobbles. Our confidence plummets. Doubts surface. Have we been misguided? Has tunnel vision blinded us to alternatives? Have we been fooling ourselves and swallowed a placebo?

Doubt can lead to healthy skepticism and prompt us to entertain alternative hypotheses. But doubt can also lead to indecision and paralysis. Worse, it can lead to nihilism.

When his ministry was thriving and people were flocking to him, John confidently declared that Jesus was the Messiah. But in prison, gasping for air, he wondered if he was mistaken so he sent his own disciples to Jesus with a question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

John believed the Messiah would produce radical change. He assumed God's chosen one would liberate them from the oppressive Romans and establish a kingdom of justice and peace. Yet, corruption was continuing to win the day. John wondered: Where was the Messiah who would punish the wicked and reward the righteous? Where was the Messiah who would finally turn the world right-side up?

We cannot blame him for yearning for goodness to triumph and evil to fail. Don't we yearn to see justice win the day? Who doesn't want to see those involved in child-trafficking stopped? Who doesn't want to see cancer cured and victims of oppression freed?

Jesus sent word back to John that he was indeed, the one. He said, “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.”

In other words, “Blessed is anyone who does not get tripped up over the kind of Messiah I am.” He was not, as many had hoped, one who wielded the kind of power that defeats armies and installs new governments. He did not possess supernatural power to wipe out the wicked and reward the righteous. He was a different kind of Messiah. He died.

And his crucifixion signaled that God’s power is not the power to control and coerce, but rather the power of love. It is a love so deep and so faithful that God will not sidestep the inevitable suffering that accompanies human existence. God promises to be by our side not only when all is right in our lives, but also when life drops us into a deep pit.

And the chief way that love transforms the world is through his followers. In the chapter preceding today’s passage, Jesus sends out his disciples with these instructions: “Proclaim the good news, cure the sick, cleanse the lepers, and raise the dead.” The acts of Jesus were picked up by his followers. But, rather than a fiery judgment, like John anticipated, were acts of compassion.

When she was a college student in Richmond, Sarah began to discern a call to ministry. She wrote a letter to several Presbyterian Churches begging someone to hire her. Her job experience at that point included dog walking and babysitting her younger brother so she thought it was a miracle that anyone would consider her. Fortunately, a small church with a warm congregation hired her.

The church did not have a youth group, so she created one. She began scooping up the teenagers and forming a group. Then, disaster struck. One of the youth, Kate, ended up in the hospital due to a failed suicide attempt.

While she was in the hospital Kate confessed to her mother that she had been enduring abuse for years. Kate began a treatment program to help her unpack her trauma and begin to heal. During that time, the church formed a small care team that wrote letters to Kate. It included her confirmation mentor, her childhood Sunday school teacher, and Mr. Franklin, who sat in the pew behind Kate’s family. That small care team took turns writing Kate a letter every week while she was in treatment.

After Kate was discharged, she shared that there were days at the beginning of her treatment where she was convinced that she would never feel healthy and whole. There were days where she was convinced that the trauma would always be at the front of her mind.

But the church kept writing letters. They told her she was not alone. They told her that they were not giving up on her. And those letters sounded a lot like the message Jesus sent to John, because those faithful folks believed in a world where the sick could be healed. They believed in a world where the poor could receive good news, and even the dead could come back to life. Kate could not see it then. Her jail cell bars were too thick. But the church could see that promised day, so they wrote letters and promised her they would always be there for her.

And now, dozens of letters and many years later, Kate can finally see some of that for herself. She has a dog, a niece, a group of friends, and a college degree. Kate has a joy that she never knew before. When a good life felt out of reach, it was the love of church members that saved her.

There are things in life that can threaten to erode our faith – illness, violence, injustice, abuse – the list is long. But if the circumstances of life begin to erode your faith and hope feels out of reach, let our church tell you about a girl named Kate who came back to life. Let our church tell you about glimpses of good and the fingerprints of God.<sup>1</sup> Just like Jesus did for John, remember that good news is preached to the poor, sight is restored to the blind, and the dead are raised to life.

#### NOTES

1. Sarah Are Speed, “Are You the One?” *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2024, p. 22-23.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

God of creation, we give you thanks for the breath of life. You create us in your image, embrace us as your children and grant us the freedom to live beautiful lives. Some days we are mindful of the blessings that pour joy into our souls – families that treasure us when we are at our best and endure us when we are at our worst, friends who cradle us when life is grim and celebrate with us when life is bright, children who surprise us with their fresh insights, and cheer with their uncalculating love. But, Lord, there are other days when we must squint to notice the gifts of life. On these days our thoughts are consumed by our envy of others, our cynicism toward life, and our anxiety about the future of our country and the planet.

Gracious God, You shore up our fortitude when we feel beaten down, you fuel our courage when we face struggles, and you give us reason to keep forging ahead in hope even when a better day outstrips our vision. We give you thanks for your promise that the light will never be extinguished by the darkness.

O God of majesty, as we prepare to share the Lord’s Supper, help us to be fully awake in this moment. Help us to set aside any worry or distraction that can rob us of this special time when past, present and future unite. Enable us to focus on our bond with you and our connection with one another. Forgive our failings, heal the wounds we have caused others, and transform us into people who are more Christ-like. As we eat this bread and drink this cup, fill us with joy and compassion, inspire us to be grateful and considerate, and create in us a deep thirst for justice and peace. Jesus taught us that the way to live is to love and so we pray that we may be infused with love as we share this joyful feast.

Great God, this meal harkens back to the resurrection of Christ and the assurance that we will live one day in your heavenly kingdom. Yet, it also reminds us not to be so focused on the next life that we fail to embrace the rich opportunities to experience your realm in this world. May we keep our eyes wide open for glimpses of grace, for challenges that push us to seek justice, for moments to extend compassion, and for occasions to celebrate the gift of life you have given us.

Now, hear us as we join our voices as a church family in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.