

Not Offended

Text: Matthew 11:2-15

Hymn: "Sing Praise to the God of Israel" (LSB 936)

"[John's disciples] said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see...And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.'"
Matthew 11:2-4,6

If you get John the Baptist right, you get Jesus right. "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Mt 11:11).

John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament heroes. He was an outstanding human being--he lived in the desert, subsisting on locusts and wild honey; he wore a garment of camel's hair; he baptized and taught his disciples to fast; he sternly preached a message of repentance. According to the world's way of seeing things, John the Baptist was a great figure. Even the Pharisees who probably did not care for his message were impressed by him. They went out to see John and hear him preach. Herod was fascinated by him. Even after he had John imprisoned (essentially for hate speech), Herod was so fascinated by John that he kept coming to hear him: The Gospel of Mark tells us, "When Herod heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly" (Mark 6:20). Those of you who have read Josephus, know that the first century Jewish historian was much more impressed by John the Baptist than by Jesus. That even the unspiritual world could recognize that John was extraordinary is what Jesus means by "among those born of women."

But the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. We all are poor, miserable sinners. Yet as Christians we have been born again, not of blood nor of the

will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. As children of our earthly mothers and fathers we appear to God as Christ did to the world, as nobodies. But because Jesus loved us even before we knew Him as our Savior and Lord, we appear before God our Heavenly Father as even greater than John the Baptist. How incomprehensible! How unfathomable that God would save us and make us His own! But this is the truth of the Gospel. As Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” We who have been baptized have been born of the water and the Spirit and are citizens of the kingdom of God. And even the least among us is a superstar in God’s eyes.

Jesus declares, “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” These words apply to us just as much as they did to John and his disciples two thousand years ago. People are offended by Christ, because the kingdom He brings does not meet their expectations. John, for instance. What’s his reward for answering God’s call and faithful proclaiming the message God gave him to proclaim? He’s thrown in prison. And Jesus, in effect, tells him, “You’re not getting out.” Of all the proofs Jesus gives that He *is* the One who was to come—signs which are found throughout the Book of Isaiah—there is one conspicuous by its absence. He says that the blind receive their sight. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed. And the poor are having good news preached to them, just as Isaiah 61:1 said would happen. But Jesus leaves out the words that immediately follow: “And freedom is proclaimed to the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.” For John, the Gospel will not mean release from prison. Instead he has only this Word to sustain him in prison and as he puts his head on the chopping block: “Blessed is the man who is not offended by me.”

Likewise, the reality for us is that Christ's Gospel may not cure our cancer or get us the vaccine in time or prevent our business from going bankrupt or straighten out our child or save our marriage. But "blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Because Christ does bring that which is most needed—the forgiveness of sins. He is, as John preached, the Son of God whose sandals none of us is worthy to untie, the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. If you recognize John for who he is—the Elijah who was to come—you also recognize Jesus for who he is—the Messiah and Savior who was to come. And with that knowledge and trust come all the gifts that Jesus brings with his death and resurrection—forgiveness, faith, hope, new life, peace, joy.

And how do we come to know this message about Jesus? "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for you figured this out yourself"? No, "for this was not revealed to you by man but by my Father in heaven." "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Where do these ears come from? "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." The Word of God has itself given us ears to hear and receive what it says.

Though the Gospel may be a scandal, a cause for offense, we who have been given ears to hear it receive immeasurable comfort. We stumble, but Jesus picks us up again. We doubt, but Jesus gives us faith. We are weak, but Jesus who became weak for us, makes us strong. We need look for no other than Jesus Christ. He is the One who has saved us, continues to save us, and will save us on that great and awesome day when He returns. Amen.

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