



---

## When God Disappoints

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church*

*The Third Sunday of Advent, December 15, 2019*

*Matthew 11:2-11*

There are some people in this world who are cut from a different cloth. These are people who seem driven by an inner vision that guides what they do and for which they are willing to sacrifice a lot. I saw an article in the Star Tribune recently about a man named Colin O'Brady, who was the first person to cross Antarctica solo and unsupported. He has climbed the seven highest mountains on the seven continents. And this past Friday, he and five other men began an attempt to row, in a rowboat, across the Drake Passage, which is one of the most treacherous water crossings in the world. They figure this journey between the tip of South America and Antarctica will take them three weeks of 24 hours per day rowing in 90 minute shifts, if they survive. This journey is being documented on the Discovery Channel in a show called "The Impossible Row." It is hard to imagine what drives a person to attempt feats like this, since most of us would not want to push ourselves to even a fraction of that kind of extreme.

But there are others in the world who have followed a sense of purpose beyond what most of us can imagine. Mother Theresa felt called by God to serve what she called "the poorest of the poor," and she did this for decades in the slums of India. Dietrich Bonhoeffer risked and lost his life to be one of the few German Lutherans to oppose Hitler, publicly and vocally. (contd)

Greta Thunberg is the sixteen year-old climate activist who is tirelessly urging adults to take responsible and swift action to counter climate change, since it is her generation that will bear the consequences of what we do or fail to do. She has started a movement that is swelling and growing across the globe. For this group of people, their sense of purpose swells beyond them. It involves the world and the desire to serve others, the desire to make a difference.

Our church, St. John the Baptist Episcopal church, is named after a visionary like these people. John the Baptizer was Jesus' cousin, six months older than Jesus according to Luke's gospel. He dressed in camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey, just like the ancient prophet Elijah who called the people of Israel to repentance for the violence and corruption that was at the heart of their leadership. John the Baptist called people to *act like* the people of God, and not just *claim to be* the people of God. Some scholars think he was an Essene, which was one of the three major sects within the Jewish religion at the time of Jesus. The Essenes were committed to poverty and communal living, and strict religious observance. John understood himself to be the one who was going to be the forerunner of the Messiah, the one foretold by the prophets to "prepare the way of the Lord." He understood that he would be pointing toward Jesus. John was ferocious. He was courageous. He did not fear anyone. He said what needed to be said and trusted the fire God put in his belly to proclaim the need for the people to repent, to change their ways. He trusted that God would send the Messiah to lead the people to a future where there would be no more oppression by an empire that required them to deny who they were as Jews.

And by the time reached in today's gospel text, John is in prison. It was predictable that he would be in prison because he criticized Herod, the Jewish leader in cahoots with Rome. In today's terms I think we'd call Herod a narcissist. He wanted his brother's wife and so he just took her. And John criticized him for that. So Herod put him in prison, because Herod could do anything he wanted to do. And while John was in prison, it sounds like John's disciples had been hanging around Jesus. And they were confused by what they saw Jesus and his disciples doing. Jesus and his disciples, unlike the Essenes, were not strict about religious observance. They did not follow the rituals for purification, and seemed to stretch the rules about no work on the Sabbath. Jesus did not seem to be leading the charge and organizing against Rome. Word got back to John in prison, and so at the beginning of today's text, John sends a message to Jesus. It's brief. He just asks: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

I don't think we appreciate how loaded that question is. John has given his life for a purpose. He has sacrificed very much for it. He has been called by God to do it. He has lost his freedom for it and soon, he will lose his life. But the purpose he thought he was dedicating his life for is not materializing the way he wants it to, the way he needs it to. Jesus is not doing what John thought he should do. I think we can go so far as to say that Jesus has really disappointed John.

Now lest we skip over that too quickly, I'd like to ask you a question.

Has God ever disappointed you?

You may not be a person with a fire in the belly like John the Baptizer or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Greta Thunberg. Or maybe you are.....

But maybe you've needed things and have prayed tirelessly for them, and God has not responded. Or maybe you've been faithful your whole life to church, and pledging, and volunteering, but church isn't the place of community and inspiration and making a difference in the world that you hoped it would be and thought it should be. Or maybe your marriage or your family is not even half as loving and enjoyable or supportive as you need. Maybe you have even disappointed yourself.

What do we do when our deepest hopes for our lives disappoint? What was John supposed to do? He started doubting himself, I think. He started wondering if he had just wasted his time all his life. He started wondering if maybe he was just wrong. That God had not sent Jesus and God had not sent John either. Was Jesus the one who is to come, or were they supposed to wait for someone else? A friend of mine has been working tirelessly for justice, for interfaith movements of peace and truth-telling and kindness, her whole life. She told me recently that she felt kicked in the stomach by the direction the country seems to be moving in. Have all her efforts been wasted? Could she spend her last breath, sacrifice everything she has, only to feel she has made no difference in the world at all?

What was Jesus' response?

He said to John's disciples, go back and tell John what you see and hear. He is saying to them, are you really paying attention? What is your actual experience? Have you paid attention to what is right in front of you? In actual fact there are tiny miracles, signs of life, genuine reasons for hope, all around us.

An alcoholic believes it's impossible for her to get sober, and maybe under her own steam it is. But she connects with AA and a higher power, and one day of recovery becomes a week, and a month, and a year, and a decade, and a lifetime. Then the alcoholic shares her experience, strength and hope—what she has seen and heard herself in her own life—with others, and that helps them get sober. Climate change scientists publish their findings, and in response, even if the governments of the world don't pass laws that require people to change, individual people change anyway, and a movement grows. Did you know that regardless of whether or not the United States government rejoins the Paris Climate Accords, you can choose today through Xcel Energy to have 100% of your home's electricity come from renewable resources? The U.S. government cannot stop you from doing this. Mahatma Gandhi insisted that India could become free of the British nonviolently, and it happened, and this inspired countless other nonviolent revolutions around the globe, including Dr. Martin Luther King's movement to end racism in this country. The seeds of change have sprouted, and God is watering those seeds, and new life is happening all around us, if only we have eyes to see it.

Jesus says this about what is happening around him: "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." The impossible is made possible. Those who suffer and are impaired are made whole. Those who are untouchable are brought back into community. Those who struggle under the crushing weight of poverty receive amnesty and forgiveness of debt and a new start. None of these things took away from the oppression around them, which was real. Jesus was not leading a political or military campaign against Rome. The Drake Passage is really dangerous, and Colin O'Brady and his friends might not survive the journey. ...

Mother Theresa lived a very difficult life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King were killed for their witness. But they all participated in God's work to make everything whole, and the world was changed because of them.

John the Baptizer had a fire in the belly for the vision God gave him, for the calling he received from God. His vision needed a little tweaking, is all. He needed the capacity to recognize the movement of God all around him that was happening right in the middle of empire. Most of us need the same thing. We need eyes to see and ears to hear that we do not need to despair. God is alive and active, and we can participate in what God is up to.

You may not think of yourself as a Colin O'Brady who is trying to cross the Drake Passage in a row boat, or as a Mother Theresa who serves the untouchables in India, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Greta Thunberg or Martin Luther King. But God in Christ calls us to have vision, to open our eyes to the impossible that God is bringing into life all around us. The blind receive their sight, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. Under our own steam we may feel powerless, but our God is one who is always bringing life where it was impossible. What is God calling you to see and hear? What is God doing, right in front of you, that you have not yet recognized?

We have cause for hope. We are people of Advent. Let our vision come into focus. Jesus is coming.