Text: Matthew 11:2-15

**Introduction**

These middle two Sunday of Advent the gospel lessons are always given over to John the Baptist. And last week we talked about the now and the not yet. To the prophet – and John according to Jesus is the greatest of the prophets – it is that now which is important. The prophet summons us into what in Greek is Kairos time – the appointed time. “The axe is already at the root of the tree…”

Our world has a few problems with the prophetic now. We often don’t keep it connected to the Word of God. We listen to people calling for something now, often in the name of God, and we don’t test the proclamation against the Word. We gather people who tell our itching ears what they want to hear. (Pause) We’d rather put it off. When that appointed time comes we reply, “let me go an bury my father” or “I just bought a farm and must take care of that.” (Pause) But maybe toughest thing of the now…is the not yet. The promises are part of the now – now you have eternal life in Christ. But then we have a funeral. We hear the promises of a righteous branch who rules in justice. And then we experience repeated injustice. There is a funny fancy term for this: we try to immanentize the eschaton – to make the Kingdom come in its fullness right now, by our own power. And of course when we do that it usually ends with the absurdity of that Vietnam era phrase: we had to destroy the village to save it.

**Text**

I should mention that a more traditional reading of this text places John the Baptist in a teaching role. He sends his disciples to Jesus intentionally. Whether that was to allow Jesus to give the answer he gives, or to give his disciples one more chance to leave him and follow lamb depends upon the commentator. But they all ascribe some sage like wisdom to John in his question to Jesus. Those satisfied the intellectual in me and they firmly keep the halo on the Baptist’s head, but when I read this text, none of that make emotional sense.

John is sitting in prison. The only thing that is keeping him alive is that Herod has a sentimental fear of the prophet, and Salome hasn’t done her dance yet. And everything he’s prophesied doesn’t really look like it’s happening. Where is the messiah swinging the axe? Where is the threshing floor being cleared? Where is the baptism of fire?

“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

Was I wrong? Are you not the one? Am I sitting in prison for something that isn’t happening? Or maybe even: hey, get with it Jesus. That Kingdom I said was near, it should be here by now. I said now, and you are making me look foolish. That always maybe more emotional sense. It’s the emotions of the not yet.

And Jesus’ answer to the problems of the not yet I think has three levels. He tells John’s disciples to go back to John and tell him three things.

The first is simply the listing of the miracles. “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the lepers are cleansed… the dead are raised.” In short the signs of the messiah are being done. Jesus would say in John, “if you don’t believe me, believe the miracles (John 10:38).” Ultimately such a faith based totally in the miracles isn’t complete. “You believe because you have seen, blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” And both Galatians and the Book of Revelation would complicate this today. If someone shows up doing miracles but preaching a different gospel, something that Revelation says will happen, don’t believe them. You’ve got to check it with the gospel you have received. But the miracles of Jesus are proofs that he is the one…the one he claims to be. So John gets his answers. You haven’t prophesied in vain. Yes, I am the one.

**Christology**

But the next two parts of the answer are of the not yet. The miracles are works of power and glory. But now is not the day of the final clearing of the threshing floor. The Kingdom is here now, but not yet in full glory. Because now, “the poor have the good news preached to them.”

The winnowing fork is not out pushing the chaff into unquenchable fire right now, because now is the time to proclaim the peace of God to all us poor miserable sinners. We might think we want the Kingdom in full power, we may want to immanentize the eschaton, but know what that means. The day of grace is over. It’s a bit like the end of the book of Jonah that the Sunday school lessons skip over. Jonah retires outside Nineveh waiting for the fire and brimstone to rain down. And when it doesn’t happen complains. And God gives him a little lesson with a vine. Its amusing, I’d say go read it. But the question of it is “are you sure you want this on your time and not gods? Are you sure you are that wise?”

We live in the not yet, because now, “the poor – including us – have the good news proclaimed to them.”

**Moral**

Jesus’ third response to John is the brutal honesty of living in the now and not yet. “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

This is the only messiah we get. We get the messiah of the cross. We get the messiah of weakness. We get the messiah who comes in promise and peace and grace. And this is how God has chosen to act. We might think – like Job – that God owes us answers for why we don’t get justice now. But we don’t. We just get a messiah who suffers with us. We might think – like Jonah – we know who God should cast away. Yet the messiah we have tells us the prostitutes and the tax collectors go in first. We might think that we know when and where and how God should act. But he has acted in Jesus. And He is here in bread and wine. And he shows up where two or three are gathered. And usually not in respectable places. “blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

John, you, everyone who might not like the look of this messiah and how he has chosen to act. Tough. This is the only one you get. And he’s not changing his plans because we don’t like him and his way. Make your choice.

**Eschatological**

Jesus’ answers to John are also meaningful to us, but it is at that point that Jesus turns to the crowds. And there is a distinction between John the crowds. John is one who believes. His faith may not be perfect. Whose is? But it is faith. Call it faith seeking understanding. The crowds are a mixture. The crowds are mostly those looking for their fill of bread…their daily entertainment.

Jesus challenges the crowds in two ways. What did you come to see? Why are you in a church today? Did you come out to hear someone tell you whatever the conventional wisdom of the day is? The conventional wisdom that will change tomorrow when the wind changes? That the reed will blow a different way that day? There are better places for that than the wilderness. Are you interested in power and influence? The c-suites and senator’s offices and $5000 suits are a long way from here. What did you comes out to hear? If your answer is not the Word of God, it’s the wrong answer. That Word of God is supposed to be challenging – like the Baptist. And you’ll know it when you hear it.

And when you hear it, the appointed time has come. Now is the day of your grace.

But Jesus’ second word to the crowd reminds them of the not yet of that grace. “The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”

When you accept the grace, you accept the cross. In the now, the Kingdom suffers violence. The Devil is out there seeking everyone he may devour. The world, the violent, will persecute it. And even our own flesh will seem at war with the Spirit that lives in us. The Kingdom that comes now by grace is a kingdom seen under suffering.

The kingdom will come in power. Everything that John prophesied comes. The axe, the division. The justice of the King. But not yet. Now, the kingdom suffers violence.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.