

Matthew 11: 2-11 Do you see what I see?

Do you see what I see? This is the title of a song in which this question is posed by the wind to the little lamb who then poses a similar question to the shepherd boy. The shepherd boy then asks the king if he knows what is being revealed through wind, the star, the song, and so on. What is being revealed in the child the song tells us is the bringing of goodness and light. Last week when we visited the testimony of John the Baptist, we discovered two reasons that the Baptizer appears during the Advent Season. There is the continuance of the call to be awake and be ready for the coming of the promised one through acknowledgement of sin and repentance; through a reversal of living according to the precepts of the kingdoms of the world and to instead follow the way of the coming reign of God. Advent is the time of preparation, of confidence that God's promises relayed by the Hebrew prophets will be fulfilled. For Christians it is to understand that constant alertness is needed to be ready for Christ coming again. Last week John the Baptist's voice may have been crying in the wilderness, but it was a strong and confident voice. He proclaimed the imminent arrival of the Messiah. Repentance was a matter of urgency because the one more powerful than him was coming. That one was near and was preparing to exercise that power in judgment. In the verses just after last week's text, we find that Jesus and John the Baptist meet when Jesus comes to the River Jordan. There Jesus asks to be baptized by John. Because John recognized in Jesus the promised Messiah he was reluctant to perform the baptism. John confirms his role as herald and separates himself from the Messianic role. He attests to Jesus' role as Messiah. In today's passage we are almost halfway through Jesus' Galilean ministry. He has been traveling through the countryside teaching and healing, presiding at miracles which fulfill aspects of the Isaiah visions where pain and suffering are over; there is no illness or oppression. We are not told of any further interactions between Jesus and John after the one which seems to be the prelude to beginning of Jesus' ministry. Until now. But today our passage begins with John in a very different place. John is no longer free to proclaim the need for repentance. John who expected the Messiah to bring judgment and justice for the oppressed is now the prisoner of Herod. John was imprisoned for much the same type of comments he made to the Pharisees and Sadducees within our previous text when he called them a brood of vipers. He has bluntly called into judgment the behavior of King Herod. Instead of the judgment upon the unrighteous being executed, it seems that unrighteousness is still prevailing. The countryside is full of news about this man Jesus, but the news is not what John the Baptist had envisioned. Remember John envisioned a baptism of fire instead of water, a separation of the chaff from the grain with the grain gathered and the chaff burned in an unquenchable fire. John gives us the image of the ax lying at the root of the tree which does not bear fruit. The news he hears in his prison cell is not that of judgment being exercised. Sitting there in his prison cell with plenty of time to think and compare his expectations to what he is hearing, it is little wonder that John begins to wonder about Jesus' identity. Jesus and his ministry fit neither John's expectations nor those of Jewish messianic tradition in general. The prevalent expectation was a powerful ruler who would free Israel from the oppression of Rome and reestablish the nation state. From his prison cell, John manages to get word out to some of his followers. Instead of proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, John now requests that his disciples go find Jesus and bluntly ask for affirmation of his identity. "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" "The One Who Is to Come" is a

euphemism for the Messiah, the Son of God, the single and unique One on whom history will hinge. With giving this mission to his disciples to seek out Jesus and directly ask this question John gives voice to the gap between his understanding of the One expected and the One who has come. Jesus did not take up the mantle of the ascetic prophet like John but instead he ate and drank with sinners and tax collectors. He did not assume the role of a Davidic warrior king or ruler. Instead he preached non-resistance, the turning of the other cheek, and the giving of self-sacrificial love. Furthermore, Jesus did not march on Jerusalem nor did he thunder condemnation on Caesar or his legions. These were the hopes of the time for the Messiah.

The deliverance longed for is not the deliverance that is being prepared for all people by God. That the one he identified as Messiah was not doing any of the things he expected probably confused John. So being a rather blunt and to the point individual, John poses this question for Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come?". When John's disciples go to Jesus and pose the question the reply by Jesus is not as direct. Jesus gives neither a yes nor a no as the answer. Jesus' response to John's question carries no judgment, no surprise, not even a small indication that Jesus would wonder why John is now questioning his own proclamation. It is typical that in his reply Jesus does not proclaim himself the Messiah; he proclaims the kingdom of God. Jesus tells those who have come on John's behalf to look around; to see and hear what are going on. Specifically Jesus says to them, "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. What Jesus was proclaiming was the in-breaking of God's reign according to the visions found in Isaiah about what God's kingdom looks like. Jesus proclaimed that this salvation, this deliverance was for the least, the last and the lost. With his response for them to look around, Jesus is inviting them to see the fulfillment of a different set of Scriptures. Jesus was pointing out that he was bringing the kingdom of God near—the kingdom where pain and suffering will be defeated and all will have abundant life. Jesus is bringing God's presence more fully into the world. The last comment by Jesus to John's disciples is: "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." That often seems to be a strange addition to the text. But perhaps is it not so much a comment about what Jesus is pointing out to the disciples as it is addressing the reality that John might not be convinced that Jesus' actions were those of the One who is to come. What if John already knew what Jesus was doing—that healing, even unprecedented healing was being done by Jesus, but it just didn't fit into John's understanding of what the Messiah should be doing. Perhaps restoration of sight, health and even life seemed to John a little too ordinary, too mundane, to signify that God was at work in and through the one John had earlier heralded with such confidence. Perhaps Jesus is acknowledging that John is reluctant to give up his Messianic vision for the reality of God's vision. Jesus would live out the messianic script playing by his own rules and fulfilling the Scriptures which motivated him and his ministry, not some preconceived notion of what a messiah must do and be. This text shows us the underlying differences between people's expectations, even John's, and the reality of who Jesus was and the actual character of his ministry. And it also points to the same issue within us. Are we really any different? What limitations have been placed on our imagination and expectations of the way God works in the world? Do we look around and fail to see God at work in the ordinary arenas of our lives? Do we carry our experiences of God with us, knowing what God's vision of the kingdom means? Do we work to participate in the bringing of that reign where all have abundant life, where

there is no more oppression, the hungry are fed? Do we imagine the ways in which we can be used by God even in the ordinary things of our lives? Look around for the possibilities. Look around for God's in-breaking. Do you see what I see? Do you hear what I hear? Do you know what I know? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.