

Message: “The Perfect Question”

What kind of questions do you hear when you’re in the car on a long trip? Parents, you know this one: “Are we there yet?” If you’re driving with me, it may be, “Should we turn around?” Knowing these questions, some of you might asking, “Do we really want to make this trip?”

There will come times when questions rise in any long journey.

“Are we making progress?” is something most of us ask at some point.

“Questions about what it’s all about are part of the journey of life.

That’s the desert part, the part where people wonder if there’s a point to continuing. Maybe we’ve lost sight of the destination. Maybe we’ve gotten lost in unfamiliar territory, and our sense of security is telling us to go back to what we know rather than ahead to what might be.

On the surface, our reading from Matthew 3:1-6 doesn’t help us with this existential angst about our life journey. John the Baptist comes in from the desert, wearing a hair shirt, ranting and raving. He’s name-calling and talking about axes, trees and fire. John seems more like a threat than a reassurance. Even when we find out his harsh words are for the “bad people” of the story - the Pharisees and Sadducees, that doesn’t help us feel better. You see, Matthew implies they weren’t there to gawk or heckle, but to be baptized.

Whoa, pump the brakes, let’s pause a moment. Maybe we need to stop and consider whether our motives are pure about anything faith-related. Do we do what we do because we’re responding to God’s call, or because we’re hedging our bets? Are we faithful because we want to follow the One we love, or because we want to be seen as faithful?

John’s call is to turn around, repent, think again. John’s call is to think differently about ourselves and our place in the world. It’s a call to think about the One who comes. It’s a call to think about how we *will* follow, and how we *are* following. John tells the church members, “Don’t rely on your pedigree.” He asks them what they’ve done lately. He asks how they’ve lived lately.

Advent brings a challenge, says John. Advent also brings a reminder of the destination – God’s promise of heaven, even for the unlovable. The challenge is to measure ourselves by that vision and promise.

No one articulates the vision better than Isaiah. That's why we come back year after year. We're willing to sit at the feet of the one who can tell a story like no one else. In a dog-eat-dog world, we need to hear about lambs and wolves, leopards and baby goats. In a world filled with division and hate, we want to hear about the calf and the lion. We need to hear about the little child leading the parade, like Simba and Timon and Pumbaa singing "Hakuna Matata" through the jungle. The vision of the "peaceful kingdom" radiates from the text.

What do the Hebrew Scriptures tell us about the journey?

Simply that it's possible. That's it in a nutshell. This whole wild and crazy promise, the vision of a world at peace, the living out the implications of justice and mercy, is possible.

Now, you're thinking, "How in the world can you say that?"

Easy. Look at the verbs in Isaiah, chapter ten, where we read:

"A shoot shall come out . . . a branch shall grow . . . the Spirit shall rest . . . He shall judge . . . the wolf shall . . . the leopard shall . . . and a little child shall lead them." And there's more. You could recite them all as a formula or recipe. This isn't a "maybe." This isn't a "what if?" This is a "shall." It's possible, because it's a promise.

You're thinking, "Wait! If I say or share this, what will happen?"

What will happen? That's the perfect Advent question. It's the perfect "Are we there yet?" question. What will happen if we tell others about the possibility of the reign of God? What will happen if we decide we're going to live with the confidence that we're heading somewhere good?

What will happen? I'll tell you one thing. When we really believe in the possibility of grace and faith, peace and joy, we'll live it – now! Peace will soak into our lives. Grace will flow from our living. Our conversation will be filled with hope. We'll listen with love. When we claim the hope God promises, the first thing that happens is: we change. We become a sign of God's presence in the world. We become evidence that it's all possible. We, who gather together to find hope for living, become hope for those who are still traveling in the desert of this life.

We are the hope we seek."¹

¹ Some material taken from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/are-we-there-yet/second-sunday-of-advent-year-a-planning-notes/second-sunday-of-advent-year-a-preaching-notes>

Isaiah 11:1-10 (CEB)

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;
a branch will sprout from his roots.

The LORD's spirit will rest upon him,
a spirit of wisdom and understanding,
a spirit of planning and strength,
a spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.

He will delight in fearing the LORD.

He won't judge by appearances,
nor decide by hearsay.

He will judge the needy with righteousness,
and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land.

He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth;
by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.

Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,
and faithfulness the belt around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb,
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;
the calf and the young lion will feed together,
and a little child will lead them.

The cow and the bear will graze.
Their young will lie down together,
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.

A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;
toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den.

They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.
The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD,
just as the water covers the sea.

On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples.
The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious.

Matthew 3:1-6 (CEB)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

*The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.”*

John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I’m not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.”