

Title: “Faith in the Midst of Suffering”

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Luke 7:19-20, Phil 4:4-7

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Service Readings: Zeph. 3:14–20 ;Phil. 4:4–7 ;Luke 7:18–28

From the prison cell, John the Baptist sends disciples to question Jesus’ identity. But he does so, not as a reed shaken by doubt but as a prophet whose faith remains solid and anchored in the promises of God.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

¹⁸The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, ¹⁹calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ²⁰And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’”

John the Baptist sits in prison, void of freedom and facing almost certain death. He knows that he has been called to pave the way for the coming Messiah, and he knows that he has done what God has ordained him to do. And from his prison cell he sends his followers to Jesus with a simple question: “are you the one that I was called to prepare the way for?” In the context of the greater story, this might seem to us a troubling question. For wasn’t it John who leapt in the womb at the presence of Jesus? Was doubt now entering his heart?

From a worldly perspective, it seems to appear that his faith is shaken. He calls out to Jesus through his disciples in this moment of doubt, seeking assurance and confirmation that the promise of God is truly to be found in the person of Jesus. And Jesus responds:

“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. ²³And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

In his moment of need, John calls out to God and God answers. He answers not just with words but actions, “See what I have already accomplished,” he tells John. “You know why I came and you see the work I have already begun.” And although not stated, I believe this gives John the comfort that he is seeking in his time of suffering.

A great prophet, a messenger called by God to pave the way for the coming Messiah. One whom no man born of woman can claim greater. John the Baptizer. John, who in a moment of worldly stress and suffering, doubts. We might wonder about his faith. Was it waning? Was it failing him as the walls of the world were closing in around him? In a word? No. In his response, Jesus makes clear that the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is unbelief! Unbelief is an outright rejection of God and the promises he makes through the death and resurrection of Jesus. John hasn’t rejected the promises of God, he just has doubts, but his faith is still strong. It still clings to these promises. And even Jesus

affirms that his faith is strong and solid, that it remains confident and unshaken by the situation he finds himself in:

²⁴When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ²⁵What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. ²⁶What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'

²⁸I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.

And what of us? Like John, we too find ourselves in moments where the shadows of doubt creep in, particularly when confronted with death and loss. John sought physical confirmation of Jesus' presence and he received it through witnessing Christ's work. We too receive this same assurance of his presence through Communion. In the Lord's Supper, Christ gives us His very body and blood - a physical manifestation of His promises. We can look to that and know that, just like John, Jesus is who he says he is. And we can draw on this to relieve all our doubts and find comfort in the situation we find ourselves in.

But there is more to be said of all this. Doubt and faith are not opposites, but what *is* opposite is the source of each. For doubt finds its source in us, alone. It is in our weakness that we begin to wonder where God is, if he cares, and if he still provides for us. We struggle with removing this doubt as the walls of the world close in on us and we experience the building pressures of life. This is all on us. This is what we do. But faith. Faith is different. It is sourced not from us but from God himself. In our baptism he sparks in us a faith that is fed and nurtured by the hearing of his word. And as long as we continue to cooperate, as long as we continue to seek out his word, he continues to work faith in us, keeping it alive and using it to sustain us in these moments of doubt.

Luther writes in the Small Catechism: I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith;

And this is our great comfort. Even as we face the same doubts that John did - in times of loss, in times of grief, in times of uncertainty - we can rest assured that our faith does not depend on our own strength. The same God who sustained John's faith in that prison cell sustains our faith today through his means of grace. The same Christ who provided physical confirmation to John provides his very body and blood to us in the Sacrament. The same spirit who called John to faith continues to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify us through word and sacrament.

So when doubt creeps in, when the shadows lengthen, when grief weighs heavy on our hearts, we need not fear that our faith is failing. For our faith, like John's, rests not on our own strength but on Christ's promises. And these promises, sealed to us in Baptism and renewed in the Lord's Supper, remain true and certain regardless of our feelings or circumstances. In this we find our peace.

Please pray with me.

In moments of doubt we can find you present at the altar. It is there where you assure us of your presence and remind us that our faith is not from ourselves but from you. Lord, let us remember this in times of our own suffering and teach us in those moments to recall the words from Paul to the Philippians:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.