

Sermon for December 11, 2016 (Advent 3, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: James 5:7-11; Canticle 15 - Magnificat; Matthew 11:2-11

Title: Are You The One?

My dear friends: what kind of saving help do you expect to receive from God? What do you expect it to look like – that speedy help and deliverance for which we earlier prayed to the Lord?

Today's very interesting Gospel passage from Matthew is all about the Lord managing expectations – the expectations of John the Baptizer and also those of the people around him.

First of all, John had been thrown into prison. Do you remember why?

Well, John had decided that Herod Antipas belonged in that notorious brood of vipers which he loved to excoriate.

John publicly pointed out that Herod's current marriage was unlawful.

Unsurprisingly, Herod took offense at this public rebuke and so he put John in prison (see Matthew 14:1-12).

In today's passage, John is now in Herod's prison but he still has been receiving reports about Jesus – literally about "the deeds of the Messiah."

All of it sounds good – it sounds great, actually, except that one thing is missing.

Why doesn't this Messiah, the Anointed One, come and bail him out? Get him out of prison? They're on the same team, after all. John is his teammate, his partner, and – even more – John is family! This is the Lord's cousin, we're talking about!

I wonder if you have ever noticed how this part of the Gospel story does NOT happen, if though we might expect it to happen, and it would not be surprising at all if it did.

Again, consider the context: John the Baptizer, the *tzadik*, the righteous man, is arrested and thrown into prison by Herod Antipas, the wicked ruler who is a collaborator with the Roman oppressors.

Right away, the stage seems perfectly set for a divine intervention, for some justice to be doled out. I mean, why doesn't the Lord go and rescue John, his cousin, his forerunner, the one who prepared the way for him? Doesn't John deserve a little bit of divine rescuing? Hasn't he earned at least that much?

And isn't this what we would expect to happen?

That right here, God would have mercy on one who fears him, that God would show the strength of his arm, and scatter the proud Herod in his conceit?

Wouldn't this be a great opportunity for God to cast down the mighty from their thrones, and lift up the lowly John?

It is my suspicion that this is EXACTLY what John's messengers expected to hear! That this is the message they expected to carry back to John – that deliverance was on its way!

But instead, the Lord says NO.

No, I will not come and set the prisoners free.

John has chosen his path. John chose this fight with Herod. He chose to put his head into the mouth of the lion. And John will have to face the consequences of his own choices.

On this past Tuesday, December 6, we celebrated the Feast of Saint Nicholas. And I believe that our children are learning more about his story this morning in Guiding RAY.

Among other things, it seems fairly certain that Nicholas was one of the 300 or more bishops who responded to the call of Emperor Constantine for the leaders of the entire church to gather together at Nicaea in order to clarify the identity and nature of our Lord Jesus.

We call this an ecumenical council, meaning the leaders of the entire church in all regions were gathered together to pray and worship, to discuss and debate. And debate they most certainly did!

The famous Arius was also present at Nicaea. Arius was a great orator, a poet and a charismatic speaker. At this Council, he was carrying the crowd with his words,

speaking with energy and aplomb about his conviction that Jesus was begotten as the first creation of God. That he was unique, the anointed one, the messiah, to be sure, but certainly not divine, not of the same substance as God.

Arius' famous line went like this: "there was a time when the Son was not."

All of this just seemed to be too much for Nicholas. The story is that he walked right up to Arius as he carried on and on, and, not being able to outmatch his opponents' rhetoric, he resorted to a more direct tactic.

He smacked Arius right upside the head!

This did not sit well with the Emperor, so Nicholas was taken by the imperial guards and thrown into prison. And he was stripped of his position as Bishop of Myra.

Saint Nicholas had to pay the price for his impulsive anger! He had to wait until the end of the Council when his orthodox position clearly won the day and he was restored to his rightful episcopal status.

But there is another version of this story! Pious tradition states that the Lord Jesus and his mother Mary visited Nicholas while he languished in that Roman jail. It is said that they miraculously came to him and brought him a book of the Gospels and the pallium – the two clear symbols of a bishop's position in those days.

In this version of the story, God intervened in that prison and justice was done right away! The righteous man was immediately restored to his rightful position of honor.

It's my suspicion that we like this version better than the first one – that we like the version of the story in which God looks with favor on his lowly servant Nicholas and speedily comes to his aid.

And I suspect that if we were writing the Gospel of Matthew today, we would make sure that the good and righteous John the Baptist does not get his head cut off but the evil Herod! It just doesn't seem right or fair, does it?!

And it makes us wonder: what are we supposed to expect from God? How does God intervene in our lives to cause justice and righteousness to roll down like a mighty flood?

Especially in this season of Advent, we love to join Mary in singing her song of praise. But, really, if we are going to be honest, when do we see these things taking place?

When do we see the mighty cast down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up?
When do we see the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent away empty?

I wish I had a quick and easy answer to give you for all of these questions, but there is nothing at all to be gained from false promises and unrealistic expectations.

The truth of today's Gospel reading tells us this: God does NOT save us from the practical consequences of our own choices.

Now, I am NOT suggesting that God does not intervene in our lives with grace and mercy. God most certainly does this.

But this much also seems certain: we can and must expect to be tested and tried. We can expect to be challenged and stretched. We must expect to be uncomfortable.

Why? Why does life need to be this way? Why is this necessary? Because it is the only way that we humans learn and grow.

I recently came across an approach to parenting called "Good Enough Parenting." This approach is based upon the works of an English psychoanalyst and pediatrician named Dr. Donald Winnicott and it's been expanded upon by others since Winnicott first published his ideas back in the 1960s.

"Good Enough Parents". I love that description!
Not the best parents ever. Not perfect parents. But just, good enough parents.

The idea is that good enough parents provide a loving and secure environment in which their child is allowed on occasion to fail and to learn about cause and effect, to discover what happens when we as humans make unhealthy choices.

When some level of suffering is bound to come, good enough parents help their children to heal and to recover, to learn and to grow, and eventually to become fully independent and self-sufficient.

Could this tell us something important about what we can expect from God whom we call our heavenly Father?

In the letter of James, we receive this word of encouragement: consider the patient endurance of Job and remember that, no matter what and all appearances to the contrary, the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

So I ask again: what kind of saving help can we actually expect to receive from God? That promise of mercy, that speedy help and deliverance for which we pray, what can we realistically expect that God will do for us?

As we live in this in-between time of Advent, with one foot in the kingdom of heaven and one foot in this world, being united with Christ while still waiting for the Lord to come, perhaps what we can expect is the opportunity to learn and to grow, and the grace to find healing and forgiveness when we mess up.

And when we do screw up and fail, perhaps it is enough to know that Christ is with us and in us, above us and below us, before us and among us.

Perhaps this promise of compassionate and merciful presence is enough after all, and is even more than we could ever ask for!

Because this much WE know to be true: the Lord will never leave us nor forsake us, no matter what. Thanks be to God. Amen.