

s-A2A-07-The Sign of Hope  
Isa. 11:1-10 *A shoot from the stump of Jesse*  
Mt. 11:2-19 *"Go and tell John"* (lection for A3A)  
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## STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN: THE SIGN OF HOPE

Have you ever attempted to go to the annual women's sale at Nordstrom's Department Store? You can easily get killed trying to make it from your car door to the store entrance—run down by bargain-crazed wealthy matrons in Mercedes-Benzes! The old stereotype still kind of rings true—a couple of church members recently got stuck shopping at the 4 am "Black Friday" sales at the mall, and discovered a checkout line that ran completely around the inside of the store. I've waited three hours in line to see a great performer, but not to pay for Christmas wrap and slippers.

People in Jesus' day would've been pretty excited to find a bargain. They probably would do what a lot of modern folks do—succumb to the excitement of a low price and end up spending more money than they meant to all along. People back then just had less stuff. They also had more monotonous lives than we enjoy (or endure). A local visit from a preacher or a prophet ought to be pretty exciting, and might even draw a bigger crowd than the local goat sale.

Yes, they'd go and see; they'd go and listen, but they might not respond much to what they saw and heard. Maybe they were so used to the monotony that these prophets just seemed scary and their message too strange to take in. Maybe they were too cowed by the authorities who were on their backs all the time to obey, be quiet, don't complain.

In today's story we are shown two prophets—John and Jesus. Two religious leaders with contrasting styles and very different messages. And yet they were linked together by blood, by history, and by their roles in the gospel story!

John the Baptist came down out of the hills, wearing camel skin like a caveman and with bugs stuck in his teeth. What a wild man, with a wild word to tell! And his message was a harsh one, too—necessary, but stark and frightening—it was a call to repentance and reparation and sackcloth and ashes.

And yet people flocked to hear him, and they wondered at his message and pondered if he might be the second coming of Elijah, for the return of that prophet had been foretold and remembered for centuries of Passovers.

John was a successful prophet. He was good at getting people to come and be baptized. He prayed over them and washed them clean in the Jordan River. He sent them packing, dripping wet and shivering, wiping the weeds out of their eyes, feeling all ready to start life over and maybe do it better this time.

And he attracted attention. How could he not, being Elijah returned? That's better than a free Barbra Streisand comeback tour or finding out that Will Rogers is still alive and playing at the Smith Center next week. Better than discovering that your favorite presidential candidate is the genuine reincarnation of George Washington or that your doctor's name is really Schweitzer. Hot diggity dog! If John were really Elijah, then that would mean... that would mean... it would mean that the Messiah.. was...on...his...way!

But listen here, later on, when John was sitting there, rotting in prison—having attracted a little *too much* attention in the wrong quarter—he sends a note to Jesus to ask *him*: Are YOU Elijah? Are you the prophet whose return we've been awaiting? The one that will foretell the true coming of Messiah?

Or are you just another preacher, another nice guy with a good speaking voice, another wise man with some good advice to sell? Should we get our hopes up, Cousin, or not? You know, I've discovered that it really hurts to dig down deep and find some hope, only to have it squashed yet again. It gets harder and harder to find any hope at all, let alone maintain it and fan its flame and keep it glowing and growing. It just gets harder all the time!"

Even John the Baptist was depressed: "Are you the one, Jesus? THE prophet, Elijah, maybe even the Messiah himself? It's hard to get excited, sitting here in prison, waiting to have my head chopped off. All I did was try to give the people a little hope—if not for this life, then at least for the next one."

And Jesus sends John a reply to that question. Typical Jesus, he doesn't say yes or no. He tells John to trust his own experience: what have *you* seen? What have *you* heard? What are you *feeling*?? *Hey*, the blind see and the lame walk, the diseased are healed and ears are opened to new wisdom. The dead are raised—and even more miraculous than *that*, the poor *are* receiving good news for once!

And when the crowd clamors for facts—is John Elijah? Is that for sure?—Jesus talks to them about the situation. He says, "When you went out in the wilderness, looking for John the Baptist, or Elijah, or your salvation, what exactly did you do once you got there? Were you distracted by the scenery? Looking for an oasis? Expecting somebody splendid and impressive to appear? Well, you won't find that kind of person wandering in the desert, eating locusts and wild honey. So if you didn't know what you were looking for, why did you go out at all? If you didn't know what you wanted, why did you try?"

“Ah, I see. You wanted to find out if John was a prophet. And what happened? Did he convince you? I hope so, because he is indeed, a prophet, and more than any ordinary prophet. If he isn’t exactly Elijah, he’s just as important as Elijah was! In fact, there’s nobody alive today who’s more critical to the coming of God’s kingdom than John is.

“Did you notice? The moment John came walking down out of those arid hills, things started to happen. He was the catalyst of a major shift in how the world functions. A paradigm shift; a spanner in the works; a total three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turnaround.

“And let me tell you: that’s when souls started banging on the door to heaven. They were ready to break it in! People glimpsed salvation, and one glimpse was all it took. One taste of heaven, and you know you have to have it, no matter what! THAT was what John showed you—something really worth having. Oh, yes, he’s a prophet, all right. In fact, he’s THE prophet, the one that scripture foretold.

“But I’ll let you in on a secret: those who will inhabit the new kingdom of righteousness will be even greater than John. That’s how powerful this new identity will be. That’s how amazing this new way of thinking is. That’s how far we’ve come, babies—we’re on the verge of a whole new spiritual reality—where the first comes last and the poor inherit the earth. John was the turning point. He was the last of the great old world. I am the first of what is coming, and is now here!

“The problem is, none of you seem to be noticing. They came out in droves to hear John; they’re coming out in multitudes to get a glimpse of me. But I’ve never known people to be so dense and obtuse! Nothing gets through to you; nothing really impresses or satisfies you.

“John was all gloomy—making us all feel guilty and demanding our contrition; looking like a street crazy and refusing anything approaching comfort. And everybody took one look at him and said he couldn’t be normal—must have a demon or something.

“And here, I’m just the opposite—I’m trying to give everybody some uplifting news for a change—but because unlike John, I enjoy the good things God gives us in this world: a hearty meal, good company, interesting conversation—everybody takes a look at me and condemns me as a sybarite just because I’m willing to sit down with people who aren’t perfect and probably never will be.

“Someday somebody will say that you can please all of the people *some* of the time, and some of the people *all* of the time, but even if you’re the Messiah himself, you better not figure on being able to please *all* of the people *all* of the time!

"We piped for you, and you wouldn't dance, John; and we lamented but you wouldn't mourn, Jesus! But here's the deal—life can be a funeral or a wedding feast.

*You have to choose!* You can't claim to have heard the message unless and until it changes your life."

So now we are well into Advent, on our way to Christmas, and we're fighting and fussing through all the holiday botheration. I'm feeling a little bit depressed; how about you? Or maybe even worse than that? And Jesus might say to us, a little bit frustrated: "You wanted it cheery, and it's cheery; you wanted some seriousness and here it is; but nothing I do seems to satisfy you."

Oh, Jesus, it isn't *you!* The trouble is with me. I can never seem to accept that Advent isn't really a time for solving practical problems. It's not really a time for doing, it's a time for *being*. Advent is *existential*. Even more so than Lent.

So try this for size: say to yourself, right now, "What does it mean *for me* that Jesus Christ is coming, and is now here? What does it mean for *me*, personally, that God is establishing a new way of being in this moment in time? What is the intimate, ultimate affect on how I think, act, feel and exist?"

We have to start here, with ourselves. Because if Jesus can't change *me*, how can the world be changed? If I don't take in Jesus' message and convert it into hope, how can I survive for one more year? How can you?

But I am reminded, as Jesus told John the Baptist, to pay attention to the miracles going on all around me: "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."

And brothers and sisters, are not those self-same miracles still happening today? Those and many more? Some even more wonderful and unbelievable? And is not Christ come among us, and is he not working within us and through us? And shall we not have *hope*? "For behold, I am making all things new!"

Yes, we shall have hope. Amen.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER:

O God, you come to us in so many amazing ways. Some ways you manifest yourself are small and gentle and subtle; others are huge and tumultuous and life-changing. But none of the ways we experience you has had the impact that your Son has had; he truly altered the course of history by offering us new ways of life, love, and faith. He brought about the kingdom of God, and rules it, and invites us to be part and parcel of it. In his holy name we pray that it might be so, forever and ever. Amen.

