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Texts: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-10

The Four Ds

When we think of John the Baptist, most likely we picture him living in the desert, dressed in weird clothing, sporting wild hair, and preaching about repentance to the people who make the trek out to see him. According to Matthew, chapter 3, even after the people confess their sins and are baptized in the river, he continues to warn them not to rely on their heritage, on their family tree, but to turn completely away from sin and completely toward God.

John tells them about someone more powerful than he who will be appearing on the scene soon. This person won't baptize the people with water as John is doing. He will cleanse the people with fire and with the Holy Spirit. He will clear out the bad and gather up the good.

Reading on in Matthew 3, we find Jesus coming out to the desert and asking John to baptize him. At first John protests, saying it should be the other way around, Jesus should baptize John. He relents after Jesus explains that this is the right, true, and faithful thing to do.

When Jesus is emerging from the water, the heavens open up. He sees the Spirit of God coming to rest on him. He hears a voice saying, "This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

I wonder if John hears this voice confirming Jesus' identity. The text isn't quite clear about that, but it seems apparent that John acknowledges Jesus as the one he's been telling the people about.

Now we jump ahead to Matthew 11. Here we find an account of John sending some of his followers to find Jesus. John has some questions. Are you the one we've been expecting as Savior for so long? Are you the one Scripture promised would come? Or should we expect someone else?

This isn't the first time John has questions for Jesus. In a story in Matthew 9, John's followers find Jesus and ask him about fasting, an activity commonly practiced by Jews to show religious devotion, repentance, or mourning. "What's the story with fasting?" they ask Jesus. "We fast and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples don't fast!" It appears that John is questioning Jesus' devotion to God and wondering about his true identity.

What happened? How does John go from protesting that he isn't worthy of baptizing Jesus, of not even being worthy of carrying Jesus' shoes, to questioning that Jesus is the one he's been telling people about?

One clue comes in noticing John's current circumstances. He sends messengers instead of going in person because he's in jail. The events leading up to John's imprisonment are told in Matthew 14. Herod, the current Roman ruler, married Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. John denounced Herod's marriage to his sister-in-law as adulterous. Herod wanted to kill John on the spot, but he knew the people considered John a prophet, so he threw him in jail instead. The end of the story explains the origin of the phrase "calling for someone's head on a platter."

However, in today's story, John is sitting in jail as Jesus travels around, preaching and teaching. John has plenty of time to think and to wonder. It's likely that anyone who is imprisoned would be attacked by what I'm calling the 4 Ds. Given his current situation, it's not

surprising that John would have many questions about his life's work. It's hard to be positive about the future in the midst of bad circumstances.

So John sits in jail with his questions and doubts. The reports he hears about what Jesus is saying and doing don't match John's expectations for the Messiah he described to the people. He's been waiting for a great political ruler, a king, or a military hero. He had warned the people of the wrath of the one to come. He had talked about axes cutting down trees and throwing them into the fire.

But Jesus seems to be all about healing people, insisting that the poor and the meek are blessed, and talking about turning the other cheek and going the extra mile. When is the conquering going to begin? When will Jesus begin the drive to remove the Roman occupiers from the land of Israel? When will Jesus free the people from oppression?

At the very least, it seems likely that John is disappointed. His hopes and expectations for the Messiah aren't being fulfilled. It appears that his own life is a failure.

Maybe a better description of John is disillusioned. It would be worth being locked up in jail if his prophecies about Jesus were coming true, but that doesn't appear to be the case. If Jesus is the Messiah, then he's not as good a Messiah as John had believed he would be. Maybe more of the beliefs and ideals he held were false as well.

John could be experiencing dismay. The unexpected turn of events in his life and the unexpected actions of Jesus are extremely upsetting.

Or perhaps John is distressed. It's understandable that everything added together would cause extreme anxiety, sorrow, or suffering. What can he hold onto when everything is falling apart?

And so he sends messengers to Jesus, asking questions, wanting to know for sure if Jesus is the one he's been waiting for or if he should pin his hopes on someone else.

Jesus redirects John and reminds him of what a Messiah is really supposed to be doing. *Go back and tell John the things you have heard and the things you have seen. Tell him you have seen the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers cured, the deaf hear, the dead raised, and the good news preached to the poor.*¹

These are the things the prophet Isaiah promised. We find them listed in Isaiah 35 and also Isaiah 61. But Jesus brings them in a different form than expected. The people need healing, new life, wholeness, and peace. They don't need power, excess, wealth, and intimidation. They need a messenger of peace, of wholeness, of shalom. They don't need another conqueror, another dictator.

Jesus then confirms John's message and mission. *John is more than a prophet, Jesus says. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'*²

Jesus understands that he might not have been what John and everyone else were expecting. He encourages those who follow anyway. *"Blessed are those who understand what is afoot and stay on my narrow path," Jesus says.*³

This is good news for John and his followers. It's good news for us as well because we too are familiar with the four Ds. They occur in varying degrees at various points during our lives. Holiday times, especially the season from Thanksgiving through Christmas, are times when we seem especially vulnerable to attacks of the Ds.

¹ Matthew 11:4-5, *The Voice*.

² Matthew 11:9-10.

³ Matthew 11:6, *The Voice*.

It's impossible for someone to never feel disappointed. There are many things we'd like to do. We get disappointed when we can't do everything. Sometimes we set ourselves up for disappointment by setting unrealistic expectations for ourselves and for other people. Everyone fails at some point and disappointment follows. We experience disappointment with God, too, when life doesn't go the way we think it should go, when God doesn't intervene in the ways we think God should intervene.

Disillusionment is also likely to happen as we move through life. People don't turn out to be who we believed they were. We don't turn out to be who we thought we were. Beliefs we have firmly held turn out to be false. We lose our faith in churches, organizations, governments, political systems, or even in humanity as a whole.

Some disillusionment is good, even healthy. It causes us to see people and the world more realistically. It's part of forming deeper relationships. It helps us mature in our faith. Too much disillusionment can leave us on shaky ground without anything firm to hold on to. When everything seems to fall apart, it's difficult to recover.

It's hard to get through life, especially though the holidays, without some dismay. Unexpected events occur, upending plans and causing changes in direction. This is upsetting. Dismay couples with disappointment leading to disillusionment.

All of these together can cause distress. Experiences overwhelm us resulting in extreme anxiety. Great losses bring great sorrow. Our suffering is expressed in physical, emotional, or spiritual pain.

Into all of this comes Jesus. "Look for what I am doing," he says. "I'm bringing hope and new life. The weak are made strong, the feeble are made firm and the fearful are encouraged by the presence of God. I bring healing. I bring hope."

So keep watching! Jesus is coming! Jesus is bringing gifts to all people. The gifts God offers include new life, liberation from sin and oppression, and the freedom to live as God intended: in loving relationship with God, with self, with other people, with all creation.

Keep working! All of us are part of what God is doing! Do you want to keep Christ in Christmas this year? Then be Christ in Christmas. Be Christ by doing the work that he names – tend to the sick, bring the excluded and marginalized back into community, help people see goodness in the world, spread joy instead of misery, breathe life into that which is thought to be dead, be good news to the poor.

Embrace hope! Change is coming! Don't despair, believing nothing can change. Don't be arrogant, believing that you can change everything all by yourself.

Watch, work, hope and abide in the presence of God! Whatever your misgivings, whatever your disappointments, God comes to you anyway, eager to join you in your weakness, to hold onto you in your insecurity, and to comfort you in your fear. For Jesus, God in the flesh, didn't come for the strong and the proud but the weak and vulnerable. God in Jesus came for you, for me, for all of us.

God's hope is at hand. God's healing is at hand. Let God's healing heart minister to you, combatting the four Ds. Share God's healing heart with the world. *Blessed are those who recognize Jesus as the promised one and walk with him on the narrow path.*

May the God of joy visit us this Advent season and give us what we need for these days we are in. Amen.