

Joy in Judgment

by Linda Rex

December 11, 2022, 3rd Sunday in ADVENT / Joy—At times I wonder what it would have been like to have been a close relative of Jesus Christ while he lived here on earth. What stories would we have been told about the birth of our cousin? Would we have known the story about how John jumped in his mother Elizabeth's womb when his pregnant relative Mary came for a visit?

Some commentators say that John and Jesus probably did not know each other very well while others picture them as close kin. But when Jesus came to the Jordan River where John was preaching and baptizing the people, the prophet knew exactly who Jesus was and why he was there. He pointed Jesus out as being the Lamb of God, come to take away the sins of the people.

Later on, John spoke out against King Herod Antipas' recent marriage to the wife of King Herod Philip, Herodias. The result of John's truth-telling was a stint in prison, without any deliverance in sight. The gospel passage for this Sunday, Matthew 11:2–11, describes how while John the Baptizer was in prison, he sent his disciples to Jesus to verify that he indeed was the promised Anointed One or Messiah.

It's possible that John thought Jesus, if he was truly the Messiah, should have been doing something to ensure his release from prison, or perhaps even have been speaking out against Antipas. But Jesus merely pointed out to John's disciples that as the Messiah, Christ was busy doing what the Coming One was predicted to do—healing the sick, raising the dead (like he had just done for the widow in Nain) and casting out demons. In the midst of his dark and difficult circumstances, John the Baptizer may have needed some reassurance that all of his own efforts were not in vain. Or he may simply have been continuing to do what he did before—point away from himself, and point his disciples toward Christ.

Jesus' words about John were not critical, but supportive and understanding. In fact, he let his listeners know that John was a great prophet even though he would be surpassed by the least in the kingdom of God which Jesus was inaugurating. Christ challenged the crowd, saying, "blessed is he who does not take offense at Me" (NASB; in the Greek, καὶ μακάριός ἐστιν ὃς ἐὰν μὴ σκανδαλισθῇ ἐν ἐμοί). I'm not a Greek scholar, but it is interesting to note that σκανδαλισθῇ (skandalisthí) looks a lot like our English word scandal. As Jesus points out, we find blessing or joy in not being scandalized by Jesus and what he is doing, even though he might be doing things differently than we expect.

How often are we scandalized by the way Jesus is doing something in our lives or in this world? Can you think of a time when you were infuriated with the way something turned out, wondering why God didn't intervene? Why is it that the Lord allows things to happen a certain way when he could, being God, make things so very different, so very less painful or awful?

It is easy to pass judgment on God—we do it all the time. Just as the people in Jesus' day judged him as being un-Messiah-like, we expect God to jump certain hoops, and when he doesn't, we are offended or scandalized. And often we're just not honest with ourselves in regards to these things, since, as good people, we know we shouldn't be mad at God, or offended by how he runs the world.

But let's think for a moment about judgment as it was expressed in the coming of God in human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. First off, God judged us as human beings of being worthy of his love and attention. He knew we couldn't get ourselves into right relationship with him on our own, so he planned from the beginning to do what was necessary to bring us home. In Christ, God judged us as being a good creation gone astray, which needed to experience healing, redemption, renewal, and reconciliation.

All of this at work in our world was evident in the ministry and life of Jesus Christ as he cast out demons, healed the sick and broken, preached the gospel to the poor, and even raised the dead. Jesus, as a human being himself, went so far as to allow human beings to reject him, crucify him, and kill him. Even so, his judgment as he hung on the cross was forgiveness, caring for his mother, and welcoming a criminal into paradise. And God's judgment on all of us as human beings in our imprisonment in the kingdom of darkness, was to bring us all into the kingdom of light as Jesus rose from the grave in the resurrection.

Do you see that God's method of judgment is so laden with grace that it looks so much different than ours? Jesus says we aren't to stumble over him or be scandalized by him. Instead, we are to accept Jesus for who he really is—God in human flesh, our redemption and salvation, our heavenly Father's Word of grace sent to us, birthed of the Spirit. Are we scandalized by the grace God expresses to us as human beings in Christ? Or is this grace the source of our blessedness and our great joy?

During the season of Advent, we rehearse anew our preparation for the coming of the Messiah, specifically as God came in human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, a baby which was laid in a manger while angels announced the good news to shepherds on a hill nearby. Are we scandalized by the coming of God in human flesh in this humble way? Or are we grateful at God's humility and love?

Jesus Christ, as God in human flesh come for our redemption and salvation, took on a particular human body in a specific place and time. The one who made all things and sustains all things by his word and power became our close relation, becoming one of us that we might share eternity with him some day. And Jesus was willing to do this, even though he knew from the beginning what the cost would be. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross. With open hands, we share in his joy, as we receive the grace he so generously offers us, rather than being offended by the way he runs his world.

Dear Jesus, thank you for coming to us and being willing to take on our human existence as your very own for a time. Thank you for sharing your joy with us by your Spirit. Father, grant us the grace to not be offended by your Son, but to embrace him fully, allowing Jesus to be who he is for us, our joy and our salvation. Amen.

"The wilderness and the desert will be glad, and the Arabah will rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it will blossom profusely and rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy. ... Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. Say to those with anxious heart, 'Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come, but He will save you.' Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. ... the redeemed will walk there, and the ransomed of the LORD will return and come with joyful shouting to Zion, with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." Isaiah 35:1–10 NASB

"Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, 'Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'Go and report to John what you hear and see: the "blind receive sight" and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the "poor have the gospel preached to them". And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.' As these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces! But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "Behold, I sent my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.' " Matthew 11:2–11 NASB