

Luke 7:18-35

Jesus has been on the move as we heard last week. He meets friends of a Roman centurion who wants Jesus to heal his servant who is near death. Jesus does a “long distance healing” of the servant. As Jesus comes into the town of Nain, Jesus encounters a crowd of mourners. A young man, the only son of a widow,, has died leaving this woman defenceless in the world. Jesus tells the woman not to cry and is able to bring her son back to life.

So, while Jesus’ star was rising, John was rotting in the darkness of Herod’s dungeon. While he’s been locked up, Jesus has been spreading the Good News of God’s salvation: healing fevers and paralysis; touching lepers and cleansing them; delivering boatloads of fish to local fishermen; even raising a widow’s son from the dead! There were other things Jesus was doing, too, that may have raised John’s eyebrows: like stretching the Sabbath to the point that the local religious authorities accused him of outright breaking it ... and crossing enemy lines to heal the servant of a Roman centurion. Those were all the things about which John’s disciples would have informed him.

Maybe Jesus isn’t fulfilling John’s expectations. Maybe John expected Jesus to be a little more fiery. Maybe he was expecting Jesus to act like a farmer on the threshing room floor separating wheat from chaff. Whatever it was, John was feeling frustrated that Jesus wasn’t living up to expectations.

John had preached an urgent message of fiery judgment and the need for repentance. When he was born, his father had sung about how God had brought

salvation from our enemies and from the power of all those who hate us . Showing mercy to the enemies of God's people while breaking the Sabbath was probably not the revolution John had in mind.

Jesus had begun his ministry by promising release to prisoners, and now John the Baptist is a prisoner. Will Jesus, the one more powerful than John, come to rescue his cousin from prison somehow? Is Jesus really the deliverer John had prophesied? The one who would bring God's salvation? Or was John wrong about him?

John the Baptist was the cousin of Jesus. You might recall that in Luke's Gospel, John did not baptize Jesus and probably had not actually met him. I imagine Luke's John growing up hearing Mom (Elizabeth) tell the story of him leaping in the womb when meeting Mary. Jesus isn't what John grew up expecting.

Concluding that John has lost faith or is doubting is questionable. In Luke, in contrast to the other gospels, this is the first time John has "met" Jesus. John heard what Jesus is doing and is asking is this what the messiah does? So, the issue is not "is Jesus the Messiah" but "what does the Messiah do?" Is he the conventional revolutionary, and historical mishmash of the hopes and dreams of the Messiah, or has he come to bring Good News to the poor as Jesus had claimed when he read from Isaiah's scroll? It isn't John's view of Jesus that needs to be adjusted, it is John's view of what the Messiah does that needs adjusting.

But John is sitting in a jail cell. He probably heard about Jesus preaching about the release of the captives. John wasn't being freed, so was Jesus really the "real deal"?

Should he and the people look for someone else to save them? Two of John's disciples go and ask Jesus John's question: "Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?"

Jesus doesn't answer them at first. Not with words, at least. Luke says: Right then, Jesus healed many of their diseases, illnesses, and evil spirits, and he gave sight to a number of blind people. His reply was to keep doing what he was doing. Only then did he turn to John's disciples and speak: "Go back to John and tell him what you have seen and heard — the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor." That was part of his agenda, from day one — when he read from Isaiah to the synagogue at Nazareth, and said: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

That has been Jesus' mission statement all along: to bring the Good News of God's salvation to the poor. That means the actual, literal, hungry and can't-pay-their-bills poor among God's people. But Jesus also meant *everyone* who felt defeated or pushed to the margins: frustrated fishermen, lepers, widows who'd just lost their only child, even strangers in a strange land, like Roman centurions — *anyone* who's lost and alone and desperate.

John came preaching this role reversal faith and it got him imprisoned. This probably wasn't what John was expecting. He was preaching about fires and threshing floors and separating wheat from chaff. John was hard core, and he expected the one he was preparing the way for was going to kick the Romans out and put those Pharisees in their place. But then the *real* Jesus shows up and it's not what he expected. And to put

an exclamation point on it all, Jesus adds a new beatitude: Happy is anyone who doesn't stumble along the way because of me. That's Jesus' way of saying, Don't lose faith just because God's salvation doesn't sound or look like what you expected it would.

This is what John's disciples — and perhaps John himself — were struggling with. The Good News of God's salvation didn't quite line up with their expectations. That's a very human problem, even for the most righteous among us. One of the stories we recalled last week was when the prophet Elisha cleansed the Syrian officer Naaman of leprosy. The reality of God's salvation didn't match Naaman's expectations, either. Elisha told him to dip seven times in the Jordan River, and his leprosy would be cleansed. At first Naaman left offended. He said: "I thought for sure that he'd come out, stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the bad spot, and cure the skin disease. Aren't the rivers in Damascus ... better than all Israel's waters? Couldn't I wash in them and get clean?"

Naaman was only cleansed when he learned to submit to God's plan of salvation. It seems that John and his disciples were wrestling with the same issue. Jesus goes on to call John a prophet ... and more than a prophet. To see him struggle to submit like any of us, and still be so highly honoured in God's plan of salvation, should make us love John more. And give us all hope.

The issue may have been that John's understanding of the scope of God's salvation was too narrow. John's father sang about God saving Israel from our enemies. Jesus' mother Mary sang about how God had come to the aid of ... Israel. The old prophet Simeon had said Jesus would be the cause of the falling and rising of many in

Israel. All of those were true. But it wasn't the whole truth. They were all thinking of salvation in narrow terms — God saving Israel. But God sent Jesus to save all peoples — including Israel and their enemies — and all creation. As Paul would later write, God reconciled all things to himself through [Christ] — whether things on earth or in the heavens.

There's an important lesson here for believers today. Many have been taught the gospel in ways that are almost exclusively focussed on individual salvation, individual spirituality, and a personal relationship with God. Although these are important, personal salvation or fulfillment or security isn't the point of God's salvation. There's so much more to it than you or me "going to heaven." It's about being set free from sin and shame and fear in order to bring heaven to earth. God's salvation is universal in scope.

So, like John and his disciples, we need to learn to submit to the Good News of salvation on God's terms. Through Isaiah, God said: *Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are ... my plans [higher] than your plans.* God's vision will always be bigger than ours. When God's ways frustrate us, maybe the problem is that our vision is too narrow. God's plans will always be more than ours — not less.

After John's disciples depart, Jesus speaks to the crowds who have begun to follow him. He reaffirms for them John's enduring place in God's plan of salvation. The angel Gabriel had told John's father before he was born that John will be great in the Lord's eyes. And nothing — not even his despair in Herod's prison — will change that.

Jesus tells the crowds John is not some stalk blowing in the wind. John is a prophet

... and more than a prophet. Jesus tells them John is the one of whom it's written: *Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.* The scriptures had foretold John's ministry — it was part of God's plan of salvation.

John came calling for repentance to prepare the people for Jesus. The path he cleared was their very hearts, so they'd be ready to listen to Jesus and follow him. So they would know that Jesus was God's salvation.

Jesus said, no greater human being has ever been born than John. But then he turned right around and said: *Yet whoever is least in God's kingdom is greater than John.* That's because God's salvation through Jesus brings a new reality, a new order of things, a new world. In this new reality, God has lifted up the lowly, as Mary sang. The poor, the disabled, the lepers, the widows, and even the hated tax collectors have been lifted up by Jesus into God's kingdom.

Luke says that everyone who listened to John, repented and was baptized, including the tax collectors, acknowledged God's justice. That means their transformed lives proved God was right to raise up the poor and disabled and lepers and widows and tax collectors. John's ministry prepared them for God's salvation, which is God's justice because it reconciles all people to God — even tax collectors and Gentiles. On the other hand, Luke says the Pharisees and legal experts rejected God's will for themselves because they hadn't been baptized by John. By refusing John's baptism, they were saying: *We don't need to repent. We're happy the way things are.*

John is to witness what Jesus has done. So what can we expect from Jesus?

Maybe we expect Jesus to prevent hunger or keep kids from dying in wars or stop terrorist attacks. We have an imaginary God that does what we expect and then we have a real God that is not doing what we expect at all. We will be disappointed at times that God isn't all that we wanted. But remember what Jesus said: "The blind can see. The dead are raised. The poor have good news." Remember what God has done in your life and in the life of others. Jesus never lives up to our expectations. But the Jesus we get, the real one, is far more wonderful than anything we could have expected.

This raises question for followers of Jesus today — and indeed, the entire church: Do our lives acknowledge God's justice? Or are we content with the status quo, like the Pharisees who rejected the Good News of God's salvation?

God sent John to clear a path through rough, uneven terrain, full of obstacles: the stubborn hearts of humans. To raise the valleys, lower the hills, and straighten the crooked ways of resistance to the Good News of God's salvation. The tax collectors and sinners and all sorts of other hard-living outsiders had listened to John, and now were being drawn to Jesus. But the Pharisees and legal experts — the upstanding citizens and "good guys" of that day — had rejected John, and were now also opposing Jesus.

Jesus has something to say about that: "To what will I compare the people of this generation?" Jesus asked. "What are they like?" *"The people of this generation"* means people like the Pharisees and scribes — not the poor folks, tax collectors, and sinners who'd been baptized by John, and were now following Jesus. They were already on an Exodus out of that generation, into the kingdom of God.

Jesus says those of this generation — those happy with the status quo, who see no need to repent — are like children sitting in the marketplace calling out to each other, “We played the flute for you and you didn’t dance. We sang a funeral song and you didn’t cry.” When John called for weeping and repentance, the Pharisees and scribes said, He has a demon. But now Jesus has come eating and drinking — joyfully celebrating God’s salvation — and the Pharisees and scribes call Jesus a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. There’s no getting them to play along. At the same time, they put down John and Jesus for refusing to play along with their games.

Jesus says that the Pharisees and scribes are only playing games with people. But wisdom, Jesus says, is proved to be right by all her descendants. This wisdom is God’s plan of salvation. How God is reaching out through Jesus to tax collectors and sinners; to the poor and the sick; even across enemy lines to those like the Roman centurion we met last week. Those who live in and live out the Good News of God’s salvation are the descendants of God’s wisdom. And when Jesus says wisdom is proved to be right, he uses the same word that was earlier translated as *“acknowledged God’s justice.”* Those who wept with John now dance with Jesus. Those who have been ignored, forgotten, or pushed away by the Pharisees and legal experts and their games have been drawn to God’s salvation by John and now Jesus. Again, their transformed lives prove God’s wisdom. They demonstrate that God is right, and John and now Jesus are his true representatives — not the Pharisees and scribes.

John came calling the people to cry, and he was right. Jesus came calling the people to dance, and he was right, too. The Pharisees and scribes thought John was

demonic and Jesus was a drunkard, and they were wrong. There are times and seasons when we need to hear a call like John's to weep over our sins and repent. But Jesus also calls us to joyful celebration, to acknowledge God's justice, and feast on God's love. Children of wisdom will know when it's time to cry, and when it's time to dance.

Amen.