

# Third Sunday in Advent

## BEYOND A SHADOW OF A DOUBT

Matthew 11:2-11

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Analysis by Paige G. Evers

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” 4 Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 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. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” 7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 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.’ 11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

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## DIAGNOSIS: Imprisoned by Doubt

### Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Taking Offense*

It’s a simple enough question. “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” asks John the Baptist from

prison, via his disciples (v. 3). As usual, Jesus doesn't answer the question directly. But he does give the disciples some images to take back to John. "Go and tell John what you hear and see..." Jesus begins (v. 4). After he describes the words he has spoken and the deeds he has done, Jesus concludes with a beatitude: "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (v. 6). But offense had already been taken. Jesus wasn't acting like the Messiah that was supposed to come. If Jesus were the promised Messiah, why was John still in prison? Where was the judgment John had been sent to proclaim (3:11-12)? Why wasn't God getting back at Israel's enemies, as Isaiah prophesied in the Old Testament reading for the day, "Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you" (Isa. 35:4)?

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Creeping Doubt***

John's initial question generates more questions that strike at the heart of faith. There isn't enough evidence to declare with certainty that Jesus is the Messiah, so doubt creeps in. The prison where John is stuck is still locked up tight, death still claims its victims, and the sick still suffer. In such a situation, the heart is at war with itself, wanting to believe that the Messiah has come, but not trusting that he has. It may be better to wait for another after all.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *The Waiting Game***

But the truth is that there is no other. When one becomes disillusioned with the Savior that God sent, there is nowhere else to turn. Waiting becomes a futile exercise with a deadly ending. John thought that Jesus couldn't be the Messiah because he didn't see signs of God's judgment. But God's judgment will come. It will come not only to those who we perceive to be our prison guards and our oppressors. God will judge us and all those who refused to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

## PROGNOSIS: Freed by Trust

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *The Messiah's Way*

Jesus is the only one who can put an end to the waiting game. Through his life, God's promises were realized. As Jesus declared, through him "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" (v. 5). In life, Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God. In death, he secured our access to that kingdom. On the cross, Jesus took on our doubt and sin and gave us his love and righteousness in return. The good news is that Jesus' "way" (in v. 10) would lead to the cross. Through his suffering, instead of being judged and sentenced to death as we deserved, we received the promise of life in God's kingdom forever.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** – *Watching for the Messiah*

Hearing and seeing God's promises become a reality in Jesus' death and resurrection. Our hearts become marked by trust instead of doubt. How freeing it is to believe that Jesus is the one who came and died for us, and that he is the one who will come again. So in this Advent season we wait with hope and joy for the promised Messiah.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** – *The Messiah's Messengers*

As God sent John, "about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,'" (v. 10), so now God sends us out to tell others about our trust and hope in Jesus. We are instruments for God's use, called to serve the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the poor, and other neighbors who are in need. And as we serve, we can share our faith in Christ. We don't have to wait for another. Jesus, the Messiah, has come.