

“Go and Tell”

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Last week, we met John at the riverside, we walked down the straight and narrow path through the wilderness that his passionate prophecy cleared for us. We looked in the distance, where John pointed, toward a figure who was coming to baptize us in fire and create a new world. Today, we hear the voice of John crying out from a different wilderness. John is in prison. John is captured and held in expectation of an almost certain execution. John is afraid. John is in the wilderness, and his doubt and pain and grief are crying out.

John’s friends, the ones who followed him into the water, the ones he taught to pray and to serve God’s purposes, have not abandoned him. Like we are all called by scripture to do, these faithful friends, these disciples visit John in his imprisonment, bringing him tidings of the man who walks the land with healing in his hands and forgiveness in his words. That man, that one whom John himself washed in the water and witnessed a vision of God’s anointing Spirit, is Jesus, the Messiah. The one who is to come, the one for whom John has prepared the way.

Only, now John is not sure. John is behind bars at the mercies of the state and from his lonely vantage point it is hard to see the Light that has come into the world. John is in the wilderness again, and he has questions. This time, this wilderness, is different. It is darker, it feels barren and without purpose. From a lonely cell, John sent his friends to Jesus with a cry for comfort, for confirmation, for a good word from God. The Gospel tells us that the question was “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” But when we hear these words, the cry that rings out is one that feels familiar to the Christian heart, a cry in the dark in the face of hardship and sin and pain. “Are you there, God? Is that you? What would you have me do?” A man whose own words are gifts of prophecy from God, whose very life is a miracle of God’s making, the man whom Jesus calls the greatest prophet to ever live, is pierced by doubt. John is an example, a true witness to the world of God’s power, but still, like so many of us who experience grief or pain or sin or loss, John’s faith is shaken. Like so many of us who see and experience injustice in our lives, John is unsure of the future and of God’s hand at work. John’s response, his action in this place of fear and doubt, may be one of the single greatest acts of faith in scripture. In his moment of doubt, of unbelief, John does not turn away from God, but toward him. He does not turn away the friends who love him, but reaches to them for comfort. When John’s heart is questioning,

he opens his heart and cries out to Jesus, that God himself might answer, and kindle a fire of hope.

John's imprisonment is not the only thing leading him to cry out to God for answers. He has heard the stories of Jesus passed along from village to village, heard the rumors of a teacher stirring up hearts and getting into debates with the powers of politics and religion. This Messiah doesn't look, or sound, or act quite like anyone expected, and the prophet who baptized him is experiencing firsthand the consequences of this kind of holy revolution. "Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?" John's question is not only for himself, but for those on the path he forged, the people downtrodden by an unjust system and cast aside by society. John asks for the people who even in his prison cell come to listen to him and bring him messages of hope. With an execution in his future, the prophet John asks Jesus this question out of love for his own disciples. When I am gone, Jesus, will you be there for them? Will you fulfill the promises God has made them in my voice, or will they have to keep looking, searching for the answer to the question of salvation? Are you the one who is to come, or are they to wait for another? John's leadership, his love and care for his congregation, are wrapped securely in this question.

Jesus responds to John's followers not with a confirmation or a denial, but with a good word. Jesus does not send a message to John full of trite sayings and

false comforts, does not give him the clichés that are so often poured upon the ears of those in pain. Jesus hears the question, and he answers with a charge, a mission. Go and tell. Go and tell John what you hear and see. Go. Jesus receives John's doubts and in return he grants the people John loves with a commission. Jesus calls them to become evangelists. Jesus calls them witnesses, and says to them "Go and tell about it." Jesus hears the cry of the prophet in the wilderness, and sends him the Gospel. The Gospel, that is what John's disciples hear and see. 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. That is the Gospel. That is the revolution that John proclaimed was coming, the kingdom of heaven that has come near. Jesus sends to John the message that the signs of the kingdom are all around, so near that his dear friends, his disciples have seen that kingdom with their own eyes, have heard the voice of God with their own ears.

And with that answer Jesus continues his work of turning the world right way round again. With that commission, with that sending forth of John's beloved friends as witnesses to the kingdom come, Jesus sends the good word to a lonely preacher. A scared, doubting, deeply faithful man who has gone from wilderness to wilderness receives the gospel the same way that we do. We are the firsthand witnesses, seeing from day to day the miraculous healing that comes from Christ, reaching out from week to week for the incarnate word made known to us in the

breaking of the bread. We are also the prisoners and the poor, the people sitting in wait for an answer to our cry. The days we find ourselves in the lonely cell, doubting and hurting and full of fear, when we ask the gut wrenching questions of faith, the witnesses come to us, sharing with us through words and actions, stories and songs that the dead are raised and the blind receive their sight. The good news comes to us in the words of our friends, in the voices of strangers and beloved family members. And sometimes, the good news comes into the world from our own stumbling lips. Sometimes, we are the preachers, bringing good news to the poor and the captive in our lives and in our own hearts.

Sometimes we witness the miracles of God's love, and other times we are so overcome with the pain of the world that we find ourselves in the wilderness, unable to see the light. Things happen, death happens. Our heroes fail us. Our prayers meet no reply but silence. Our faith is shaken. In these moments, those we love, those we trust, even perfect strangers find us wandering and share with us the warmth of that light that we cannot see from our vantage point. That itself, that bearing of the word to us in our prison cell is a miracle of God, a sign of the kingdom, an answer to the questions we join prophets and saints in asking. "Are you there God? Are you the one, Jesus, or are we to wait for another?" God's answer comes to us over and over again. Look around you. Listen. Let yourself be reminded of the stories that you know by heart, the stories of God's love and

forgiveness and healing grace. And when you have heard, and seen, go. Go and tell about it. And then do it all again.