

Luke 7:18-23

December 15, 2024

“Rejoice in the Lord always!” is the theme before us on this Third Sunday in Advent. But John seems hardly to be rejoicing as he rots in his dungeon cell. He has not seen the light of day for some time. And he probably realizes that he never will; that at some point he will be put to death by Herod.

Not only this, John isn't even sure if Jesus is the Lord he is to rejoice in. He sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask Him: *“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”* John wants a straight answer. *“Jesus, are you the Messiah or not?”*

This is the same John the Baptist who pointed to Jesus, calling Him, *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* The same John who said of Jesus, *“He must increase, but I must decrease.”* And decrease he did. Herod pulled him out of the spotlight and into darkness. He whom Isaiah called *“the voice,”* has been utterly silenced.

How can this be? How can evil so quickly take control? John had been calling Jesus the Coming One. Yet the Messiah is more powerful than evil it says in the Old Testament. He comes to put evil in its place. And surely John wonders why Jesus is not doing this.

And here is what must really have John wondering: the Messiah comes to release those who are in bondage; those who are being held captive by evil. *“So, why am I still here? Why hasn't Jesus come to release me?”*

I don't think John is the only one who wonders such things. I think every Christian does to some extent. We see our world tightly held in the grip of evil, and we can form some misgivings about God. We pray for our loved ones who are struggling with evil in various ways, and we wonder: *“God, what are You waiting for? Why don't you help them?”*

And then, when we ourselves are confronted by evil and we face the struggle of a powerful temptation which too easily overtakes us, we find ourselves in that place where John was – being held captive to a guilty conscience. And when our conscience accuses us, we like John, can have doubts about Jesus. We can lose sight of who He truly is. *“If Jesus is the One who is coming to punish evil, then maybe He will punish me because I give in to evil so easily.”*

So, why doesn't Jesus give John a straight answer? Doesn't he deserve one? And such an answer would help us, too. Rather, Jesus sends back the two disciples to John saying, *“Tell (him) ...the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them, and blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.”*

Is Jesus the one who is to come? Is He the Messiah who puts evil in its place? And is Jesus the one who releases those who are being held captive to the bonds of evil? Go ask those who were blind whose sight Jesus restored. Ask those who were lame and paralyzed whom Jesus healed. Ask the lepers Jesus cleansed. Ask the mother of the dead man whom, just days before, Jesus raised to life. And ask the woman, the sinful woman who, right after this would wipe Jesus' feet with her tears, and whom Jesus would forgive.

You want a straight answer? They will give you one. And so will everyone who has known such love and mercy of Jesus; who has been released from the grip of evil.

The straight answer is seen most clearly in the straight crossbeam to which Jesus' hands are affixed with nails, and the vertical stauros to which His feet are nailed. Here is the One who releases sinners from the bonds of evil. For here on the cross, the Messiah would be held tightly by those same bonds. For evil to hold Jesus, it must release you. Because your sin accused Jesus, it can no longer accuse you. You are forgiven of your sin.

Yes, Jesus is the Messiah who puts evil in its place. And that place is upon Himself. He suffers the evil that so easily entangles us. And therefore, your Father in heaven says "Yes" to your prayer: "*Deliver us from evil.*" He says "Yes" when you pray: "*Forgive us our trespasses,*" because all your sins and trespasses fell upon Jesus.

"*No evil shall be allowed to befall you,*" is God's promise. And those things which we call evil, God uses to bring you back to Jesus and to keep you with Jesus.

My friends, the evil of your sin cannot keep its deadly grip on you. Not when you are wrapped up in Jesus' arms within your baptism. And your baptism will never let go of you. Even when we let go of it, which sadly can and does happen, your baptism does not turn away from you and let go of you. It always calls you back to the Lord who made you His dear child in its loving waters.

And if you have loved ones who are struggling with the grip of evil, look at what Jesus does with John's disciples. He sends them back to John with the good news. "*Tell John,*" He says to them, "*what you have seen and heard.*" And so, you too, tell your loved ones what you have seen and heard in Jesus. That He is their Messiah, too. He is their Lord and Savior, too. That they, just like you, are forgiven of all sin. And pray with them, and for them, "*Deliver us from evil.*" And be confident that your Heavenly Father, and theirs, will do just that.

Jesus would release John from the grip of evil. When John was put to death by Herod, evil no longer had any power over him. Looking forward to that day, the day of his release from this vale of tears, John most certainly could rejoice. He could rejoice in his Lord Jesus.

And so can you. Whatever sin, whatever evil is gripping you, it is no match for Jesus' grip on you. He is your Savior who forgives you of all sin. He is your Messiah who keeps evil from pulling you away from Him. He is your Lord in whom you rejoice now and always. Amen.