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St. Timothy's Episcopal Church
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Advent 3, Year "C" [RCL]: Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:4-9; James 5:7-10;
Matthew :2-11

Title: The Most Real Source of Hope

I begin with a true story this morning: I once was speaking with someone about some issues that were going on in their life – things that were troubling that person, keeping them off balance, robbing their joy. And once we had kind of exhausted our conversation, I said, "Why don't we have a word of prayer around this situation." Their response was swift and seemingly resolute. "No," they said. "I've tried prayer. It doesn't work." When I asked the person why they said that, the response was, "Cause I tried it one time and I didn't get what I asked for." I didn't say so out loud, but in my spirit I thought, "My, my we do have some work to do here."

Another story: A number of years ago, Steve Johnson, a wide receiver for the Buffalo Bills, publically railed against God because his team had lost a game to the Pittsburgh Steelers. Addressing God in a tweet he said, "I praise you 24/7!!! And this how you do me!!! You expect me to learn from this? How? I'll never forget this!! Ever!! Thanks though." End quote.

Though it was Johnson who had dropped what would have been a game-winning pass for a touchdown, in Johnson's theology, God was to blame for the loss. Surely there were those who read this tweet and thought or felt in their spirit: My, my. Here is someone who has some work to do on his theology.

My point is we all know of examples, maybe even in our own lives, where a pretty small theology has left us feeling somewhat left down by God.

I want to talk a little bit about John the Baptist this morning as we find him in a dark, dank prison cell. John is not so much feeling let down or disappointed as he is verging on disillusionment. No, John's theology is just fine. In fact, John's theology is as 'right on' as probably anyone in history. He knows very well who God is and he knows very well what is

his, John's, purpose as a minister and a prophet to the world. Yet, in this moment his knees would seem to have buckled just a little bit. Yesterday, he was sure that Jesus was the one to come. Yesterday he was pointing to Jesus and saying, "Here is the one who takes away the sins of the world." Today, he finds himself asking, "Are you the one?" Understand that it is not John's faith that is in question; it is rather that he is struggling with making sense of and struggling to come to terms with his current circumstances.

Of course John is not the only person who has found themselves in a terrible place or in terrible circumstances. And in such times we always have a choice. We can choose to say that God is letting us down. God has failed me. Or as the Apostle Paul gave us the example, we can say as he did from his prison cell that in and through Christ he had a kind of joy in his heart despite his circumstance.

Nelson Mandela sat in a prison cell for twenty-seven years – waiting – not knowing if ever he would be released. He was reportedly allowed one letter every six months. He knew not whether he would ever have a normal, comfortable visit with his family ever again. Even in those circumstances, Nelson Mandela would not give in to being forced to speak words to the world that were contrary to his cause, his mission, or his inner spirit – words which would have, in fact, led to his release. His sense of justice and his sense of his role in the establishment of that justice was that strong.

We have something to learn from examples of lives such as Nelson Mandela and John the Baptist... and I believe that it is this: Neither our faith nor our joy is ultimately dependant upon our circumstances. This does not mean that John, nor Nelson Mandela, or anyone else is necessarily super human in faith or constitution. What it does mean is that in Christ our peace and our joy are a lot a matter of choice. And yes it means that some things, some causes, some convictions are bigger than our own lives.

The one who was so sure of who Jesus was, now wonders, "Are you the one who is to come?" Matthew writes, "When John heard what Jesus was doing ...". Actually, what Matthew could have written is, "When John heard what the Messiah was *not* doing ...". Jesus was not following the pattern that John expected of the Messiah. Jesus was neither a warrior king nor was he the wielder of the axe at the root, ready to deal harshly with the unworthy. John had promised that the chaff would burn with unquenchable fire. But Jesus didn't seem to be pointing the finger of judgment. Jesus

was not the agent of a smoldering woodpile of sinners. Instead, Jesus is pronouncing forgiveness, healing the sick, bringing Good News to the poor. Was this really what Jesus was supposed to be doing? Was this really what the Messiah was to look and sound like? Are you the one who is to come? Or should I hope for someone else?

For a moment, John had been lost in the image of the God of wrath and the God of judgment. In his response to John, Jesus is reminding him that God's nature is also very much the God that heals the deaf and the blind. The God who is not only the bearer but also the creator of Good News. The God whose purpose, intention, and design for the world is like a world where growth takes place in deserts. Where the faint of heart become strong and resolute. Where deserts were once dry, clear waters now flow.

Jesus is reminding his cousin John that God has declared that one day there will be a highway and it will be the Holy Way, and it will lead to places where joy and gladness are known and sorrow and sighing are no more. Jesus reminds John that this is the God of ultimate intention. Jesus says to John's friends, "Go and tell John what you hear and see, the blind receive their sights, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Go tell John of these things. Go tell John what you see. Go tell John of the nature and fruits of the ministry I am about... and he will understand.... and he will be satisfied.

You know we are probably all, at least at some time in our lives, guilty of having expectations, of maybe constructing for ourselves the God, the Savior we want. Some do want a brimstone and fire-breathing Messiah who points out where everyone else is going wrong.

Some of us want a Jesus who will champion our favorite cause, who will assure us that God is on our side of certain issues – issue maybe theological, maybe political.

Or maybe we want a gentle shepherd who will not demand anything of us, but only assure us that he loves us.

Sooner or later, though, our ideas of Jesus bump up against reports of what he is doing, either in Scripture or in the world. Jesus – the real Jesus, the real Messiah, Lord, Shepherd, Savior, Friend, Redeemer – will at times upset our expectations. And he will ask, "Do you want to follow the living Christ, or do you want to worship your image of who you think he should

be? Do you want the thrill and hope and challenge of a life with the living Christ? Or do you merely want the comfort of worshipping an idol of your own making?"

For a moment John wondered if Jesus was really the one in whom he should rest his hope. So by way of his friends he went to Jesus to inquire of him. John went to the source instead of just muddling along, or making assumptions, or staying in the dark about who Jesus is.

Dear ones, we are invited to do the same – to go to Jesus with our questions, concerns, and wondering. Participate in the ways Jesus has given to his church to know him. Gather in community. Study with other Christians and seekers. Pray. Take communion. Worship. Praise him – even when you drop the ball as did literally the football player I spoke of earlier.

Certainly Jesus wasn't exactly what John was expecting: Oh He brought fire all right – but it was the fire of the Holy Spirit. He sought out sinners – but he forgave them. He really let the unworthy have it – but what he let them have were big doses of grace. Abundant grace. Grace upon grace.

So you see it wasn't that John was so much confused about who Jesus was as it was more that John, for a brief moment, forgot just how much bigger is our God than we are sometimes inclined to imagine. For just a moment John forgot, or maybe he was instructed, of how much more Jesus was and is than are our smaller versions of him.

Psychologists tell us that everything we do – every act, every dream, every plan, every motion is in response to hope. Hope for a better job. Hope for a better future. Hope for more joy, more happiness. Everything we do is generated by hope of something better.

But the question lingers doesn't it? The same question that John put to Jesus through prison bars still hangs in the air. Is our hope safe with you, Jesus, or should we hope in someone else? It is a question that is as old as the Bible and yet as new as today's sunrise.

Dear ones, Jesus was reminding John, and Jesus is reminding us that in the Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is our ultimate source of hope. Jesus was saying to John, "John, this is good news." And it is Good News for all to hear, to receive, to embrace, and to enfold into our lives – if we will but have it. Amen.