

December 12, 2010
Advent 3

"Jesus Is There When the Wick Burns Low"

MATTHEW 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" ⁴ Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." ⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what 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: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." ¹¹ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

I am holding in my hand a candle. If I light this candle, the wax will start to melt and begin burning. Candles can glow brightly if the wick is long. But when the wick burns down low, you can hardly see the flame burning.

So it also happens in the lives of Christians. There are those days when our faith in the Lord Jesus and his blessings glows brightly like a large flame on the candle. Then there are the low moments when the wick burns low and faith gives way to doubts and fears and disappointment.

Last week we saw John the Baptist preaching in the Jordan Valley. Large numbers of people came out to him confessing their sins and turning to Jesus as the Lamb of God who took away their sin. If ever there was a candle burning brightly for the Lord, it was John.

But then things changed. John stood up to King Herod when he tried to patronize John. He denounced his sin of adultery. John's consistent faithfulness to his message of repentance cost him time in prison and eventually his life, a life that ended in a most gruesome way. Then there was the concern for the ministry of Jesus? John and his disciples show evidence of losing hope as they go to Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

How much of the doubt came from John and how much came from his disciples? It is hard to determine. We know from the examples of other people in the Bible, and from our own personal lives, when huge changes come to us in life, we are vulnerable. When the wick burns low, Satan is right there to attack us. He raises doubts about Jesus.

The low moments come

We are told, "When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent messengers to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" John is in prison. He is not in the desert preaching to large numbers of people who came out to him. Some of you sitting here know what it is like to lose something very special to you. When these huge losses and changes come to us we are vulnerable to Satan who tries to sneak into our lives and convince us that our God is not all that special to us anymore because of the challenges and adjustments we are going through.

John's counterpart in the Old Testament, the prophet Elijah also experienced a huge let down and disappointment in his life. Remember that moment when he stood on Mount Carmel. He called for the showdown between the Lord and Baal. The prophets of Baal would call on their god to ignite a sacrifice by fire sent down from heaven. Elijah would call on the Lord. The one who ignited the sacrifice would be the true God. Oh, how the prophets of Baal called out to their god "Oh Baal hear us." No fire came down from heaven to burn the animal that had been laid on wood. Then Elijah called on the Lord. Fire came down from heaven, burnt up the wood and the sacrifice that had been doused with water, burnt up the stone and licked up the water in the trench. The people responded, "The Lord is God, the Lord is God." Elijah experienced the highest moment of his life as prophet of the Lord. But shortly after that wicked Queen Jezebel went after Elijah and he had to hide in a remote area to stay alive. Where was the Lord? Where was the glory he had seen on Mount Carmel? Elijah sat under a broom tree and asked the Lord to take his life. He wanted to die.

It wasn't just the stinky prison of King Herod, or the threat of death, or the loss of a fruitful and joyful ministry that took its toll on John and his disciples. They were bothered by the ministry of Jesus. It says when John heard what Jesus was doing, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he were the one to come or whether they should be looking for someone else to be the Messiah. John spoke of Messiah with a winnowing fork in his hand to separate the wheat from the chaff, and an axe in his hand to chop down the trees that were not producing fruit. Things were certainly not moving as quickly as they had expected. When we pray the Lord's Prayer we say, "Thy kingdom come." There are times when God's kingdom comes into the world and into our lives with such force and power. Then there are the tough times when nothing seems to be happening. We desperately need the Holy Spirit to help us see that Jesus is still in control. He is the Messiah. He is our King of kings and Lord of lords.

Very few people have ever experienced the changes in their lives that John did or that Job once did. Job had it all. He had a wonderful family. He had unparalleled wealth and riches. What he most enjoyed in his life was his integrity or wholeness that came from using his vast wealth to help other people. It was all taken away from him. He lost his children. He lost his wealth. He lost his health. He lost the opportunities to help other people. People once said, "There goes Job," Now they look in disgust and say with contempt, "There goes Job." So low does Job sink in his life that he utters these angry words against the Lord, "Have pity on me, my friends, for the hand of God has struck me!" It was in that lowest moment of life, the dark dungeon of despair, that the grace of God reached down and opens his eyes to see the blessings he had in the Lord. It was in the darkness of doubt and unbelief that faith suddenly began to shine brightly. Job was able to confess, "I know that my Redeemer lives...."

When the wick burns low, Jesus is there. Isaiah 42:17 says, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench." Notice how Jesus helps John and his disciples at this low time in their lives.

The Savior is always there for us

Jesus told the disciples of John to back to John and report what was happening in Jesus' life. "Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." Look at the mighty miracles that were taking place to prove to whole world that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the one sent from God to save us from our sins. The blind have perfect vision. The lame run and jump. Dead people are raised to life. And above all else, the poor in spirit, those who confess their sins are receiving the good news of forgiveness just as they did when John was preaching. John 20 says that all these miracles happened in the life of Jesus and are recorded for us in the Bible so that we might believe in him and have life through his name.

Then Jesus said something interesting that we need to take to heart today. "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." Following Jesus will never be easy. Jesus said to his disciples of every age, "Take up your cross and follow me." There will be the days when troubles come and we wonder why the Lord is allowing us to be carry more than our share of burdens. There will be days when living for Jesus is so hard because we continuously find ourselves falling back into sins we vowed to never repeat again in our lives. There are those days when we want to see Jesus' kingdom come in greater glory in our lives and throughout the world.

When huge changes come into our lives, we need Jesus to speak to us in his word and remind us that as long as this world stands, nothing will change who he is and nothing will change the mighty miracles he has accomplished in his life to prove to us he is the Christ, our Lord and Savior. When we lived in Santa Barbara, there was a man and his wife who lived up the dirt road that extended beyond the home that we were living in at time. Every day he rode his bike to the university. They were blessed with a little boy that was the joy of their lives. One day he took this little fellow to the university with him. I don't know what happened but the boy wandered off and drowned in the lagoon on the UCSB campus. A year later their marriage broke up. They were not able to cope with the change that had come into their lives, the loss of their son.

What if we go through changes in life in this congregation? What if the opportunities to reach people with the gospel don't appear to be happening as much as they have in the past? What if the kingdom of God is not coming to your husband or wife, or children, or friends and family members with as much power and glory as you hope it would? When expectations are dashed to the ground, and the wick starts to burn low, then we have Jesus reminding us about all the miracles he has done to save us.

This Christmas season we want Jesus to send us his Holy Spirit and help us focus on the miracles that are ours. I get to kneel at the manger of Bethlehem once again. I come confessing my sins. I have done so much to offend a holy and perfect God. I cannot save myself. But there, lying on the straw, wrapped in swaddling clothes is my Jesus. His

whole life is a miracle. He miraculously found a way to take all my sins upon himself. He rose from the dead. He wants all to be saved and share in that blessing.

Jesus had some wonderful things to say about John the Baptist. He was not a reed shaking by the wind, or someone who wore fancy clothes to be a people pleaser. He was a voice crying in the wilderness calling on people to get ready for the Lord to come. In fact Jesus said, "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." John was great because he had the privilege of pointing people to Jesus. But then Jesus says something very special about you and me. He says, "Yet he who is the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Jesus says you are great. You are great in the kingdom because you are washed clean by his cleansing blood. You are wrapped in his righteousness. From all eternity he has planned for ways for you to share his greatness as John once did. You have seen things here in this Bible about Jesus that John the Baptist never saw. That makes your position in life even greater than that of John.

Will there be days when the wick burns low? Oh, let us not be so naïve as to think if there have been some low days in the past, there will be no low days in the future. When we see how Jesus was there for John and his disciples, we know that he will be there for us as well whatever the future may bring. When the wick burns low Jesus is always there for us. Amen.