

The Very Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
Advent 3, Year A
December 11, 2022
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146:4-9
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Advent Incarceration

Last week he was full of confidence. Today he is uncertain.

Last week he was surrounded by crowds of people out in the desert beside the Jordan River. Today he is in solitary confinement.

What a contrast with last week's gospel!

Last Sunday John the Baptizer, cousin and forerunner of Jesus, child of the religious establishment, was at work in the wilderness, wearing camel's hair and living on a not-quite-vegetarian diet of grasshoppers and honey, dunking all comers in a muddy creek, and proclaiming that everyone should change their mind, their mindset and live differently.

Last Sunday we heard John declare that the one coming after him—Jesus—would baptize folks with the Holy Spirit and fire.

And John kept declaring the message God had given to him, kept speaking truth to power, including to King Herod who didn't like it much and threw him in prison.

Last Sunday John knew full well that Messiah was coming and seemed confident that Jesus was the one.

This Sunday, in prison, John isn't so sure. He sends his own disciples in person to ask Jesus himself straight up, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

This Sunday, John is in prison. And in prison, inside, life outside seems to change shape. Things one knew in one's life outside become less certain inside. Who is reliable? What is trustworthy? Who am I now? What is my purpose?

In prison, things are different.

I could preach a sermon today on prison reform and mass incarceration, or on prison ministry or on the Episcopal Church's consistent witness since 1958 against the death penalty.

I could preach about any of those things or all those things from the starting point of prison. In fact, naming them just now may have increased the level of anxiety in the room. And that is probably as it should be; prison is serious and scary and should be dealt with in a serious manner.

But today I want to go in a different direction and ask this, "What is imprisoning you?"

What is imprisoning you?

What has you locked up or shut down? As Thomas Merton put it, "What is keeping [you] from living fully for the thing you want to live for?"¹

What is imprisoning you?

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Last Sunday John the Baptizer was living on purpose. He was doing the work he was born to do. He kept right on doing it.

Last Sunday John knew who he was and knew who Jesus was.

But this Sunday he is in prison, and he needs to be reminded. He is unsure. Perhaps his faith is shaken.

Last Sunday John himself said Jesus was so great that John wasn't worthy even to untie his sandals. At the end of today's gospel Jesus calls John the greatest person ever born up till then.

So, I'm here to say if the person who in Jesus' estimation was the greatest person ever born up till that time got confused and needed reminding what he knew while in prison, we shouldn't be surprised if we need reassuring when we find ourselves imprisoned in some kind of circumstance.

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¹ Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*

To be imprisoned is to be incarcerated.

Incarceration is when a body is confined in space, confined to a space, the result of a particular circumstance.

Generally, incarceration is something that happens against our will. Sometimes though, it's something we agree to in order to achieve a particular objective.

For example, when we enter the secure area of an airport, we are incarcerated in a kind of way. Our movements are under surveillance. We are subject to searches of our persons and effects. Employees submit to this circumstance to earn a paycheck. Passengers submit to this incarceration to get from one place to another by air.

Activists in the civil rights movement and other movements for social justice have willingly gone to jail to achieve particular objectives. Often this happens as a result of civil disobedience, the deliberate breaking of an unjust law to demonstrate that the law is unjust. Like, people of color sitting at a segregated lunch counter which is against the law to demonstrate that the law is absurd and willing to go to jail for breaching the law to demonstrate that it's absurd.

But this is not to glorify prison or incarceration. Yes, Dr King wrote a powerful and prophetic letter in a Birmingham jail. Yes, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer imprisoned by the Nazis produced a compelling collection entitled *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Yes, Paul and Silas bound in jail witnessed at midnight as the Philippian jailer and his entire household came to salvation. And yes, John the Baptizer wound up in prison because of speaking truth to power.

But, as a rule, prison is not a desirable place to be. And incarceration is not usually an intended outcome.

And so, I ask again, "What is imprisoning you?" What has you locked up or shut down?

Is it consumer Christmas with its crazy expectations that everyone will be happy and merry and bright every day during this season and that buying the best stuff will fill the holes in our hearts?

Is it the grief that won't let you go as you move through these days without someone you desperately miss?

Is it the failure at school or at work that keeps you up at night?

Is it worry over bills you can't pay or insurance you don't have or may soon lose?

Is it anxiety about the aftermath of something that has already happened or anxiety about something looming on the horizon that you are afraid is going to happen?

Is it resentment you can't let go of even though you know you'd be better off without it?

What is imprisoning you? "What is keeping [you] from living fully for the thing you want to live for?"

If we feel even the slightest bit imprisoned by anything, it can throw us off our game. It can keep us from moving into God's future for us by locking our energy and attention in the past and making us miss the present. Just ask John the Baptizer.

But let's go farther with John. John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing.

Yet, he was unsure. He sent his disciples to talk to Jesus.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Imagine how desperate John must have felt, desperate enough to express his doubts and concerns in a very public way by sending his own disciples to ask this question of Jesus.

And look how Jesus responds: at this very public moment when everyone knows that John has doubts, Jesus tells everybody else how great John is, the greatest person ever born till now. Jesus does not shame him. Jesus does not shame us. Jesus empowers us to continue doing our work and gives us courage to change the things that need to be changed.

Jesus answers John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you 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."

These are all signs that Messiah has come, that a new age has been inaugurated. John knows those signs because John knows his Bible. Jesus knows John will

recognize these signs. He will accept this evidence. He just needs to be reminded of what he already knows.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say, *John knows better than to ask that*. He doesn't ask, *What's wrong with him? We have already talked about this*. No. Jesus sends John's own disciples back with a word that will get his beloved cousin back on track. He sends those folks back in person just like John sent them to Jesus in person.

Why? Because the remedy for incarceration is incarnation.

This is why James elsewhere in his letter admonishes us to visit those in prison. Don't let folks languish too long without a good word from the outside. Bring them good news in person. Incarnate the good news.

Incarceration is when a body is confined in space, to a space, the result of a particular circumstance.

Incarnation is when a body is illumined by the divine in a particular place, revealing that God's presence is already.

The good news must be incarnated. Thank God for the incarnation of Christ and of Christ in us!

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What is imprisoning you? And when will your imprisonment end?

The reading from Isaiah exhorts the children of Israel to be patient until the coming of Messiah, until the time all the works of deliverance performed by Jesus are set in motion.

Matthew's gospel today has Jesus announcing the time has come. Those long-awaited things are happening in the movement Jesus is kicking off.

The reading from James exhorts us to be patient until Christ comes again. But this patience is not passivity. We are to continue doing those things the Messiah does: healing, comforting, preaching, teaching. Patience, not passivity. It is the active hope of Advent, the ongoing process of transformation in this season of preparedness, perseverance, and paying attention.

Truly, this is where we live all the time, between the coming of Jesus into human history and the coming of Christ at the end of time. And yet Advent, this glorious season, draws it out so clearly for us though, letting us see that we are always waiting for Christ to come—and helping us see that Christ is coming to us over and over and over in the meantime, incarnated in all manner of persons.

When we encounter incarnation, incarceration is transformed.

And we the transformed and transforming are being called into the world in new ways.

God is already answering our prayer in today's collect; already stirring up God's power, already coming among us, already pouring out grace and mercy to deliver us from our own imprisonment, making us, in fact, prisoners *of hope*.

And so, as prisoners of hope, we'll now again as last week turn off all the electric lights and sit in silence in glorious radiant dark of Advent awaiting the end of our incarceration.