



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092
(262)241-3121 www.stjohnsmequon.org
Email: office@stjohnsmequon.org
Pastor James Tiefel
(262) 853-9723 (cell#)
Email: pastortiefel@gmail.com

The Third Sunday in Advent

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Come, Lord Jesus!—As Messiah

If all we knew about Jesus was his humble birth in Bethlehem, our trust in him might seem displaced. The story of Jesus is not all glitz and glory nor are the stories of those who trust in him. Life is full of disappointments and disasters and doubt often takes its toll. But things are not always what they seem. Over the poverty of the stable the angels sang “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.” We are blessed when we respond to adverse circumstances believing that Jesus has kept God’s promises and has come to save us.

Sermon **James 5:7-11**

⁷ Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. ⁹ Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

¹⁰ Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

Introduction – What a difference a couple of years makes! The last time we heard about John the Baptist (actually last Sunday) he was preaching and baptizing at the Jordan River and people were flocking to him. This morning he’s in prison. John got himself into big trouble with King Herod when he publicly condemned the king’s adultery. The king and especially the king’s wife didn’t like it at all. So here he is in a big fortress in a deep dungeon. No crowds, no baptisms, no sermons, just a few friends who tried to stay close. Jesus wasn’t one of them. Actually he was pretty far away—up and down the holy land preaching and healing. We have to wonder what John was thinking.

It’s pretty hard to put ourselves in John’s shoes. For one thing American Christians don’t worry about prisons and dungeons. And really, Jesus seems pretty close to us this morning. The Word and the sacraments are here in church, the Christmas decorations are up, and we’re all getting ready for “Joy to the World” and “Silent Night.” It’s all good. But there are times—and I’m pretty sure all of you have been through these times—there are times when Jesus has seemed pretty far away. Maybe not this past week or not even this year. But there are times in our lives when things just seem out of control, when trouble seems to be crashing down on us: a close relationship that ends, the death of someone we love, aches and pains that never go away, cancer without a cure. Maybe wider than our lives: a nation tired of religion, morality that mocks marriage, a government that can’t govern, a war that won’t end. We sit at our breakfast tables or lie on our pillows and we kind of wonder: What’s going on? We still believe in Jesus, obviously, but sometimes he seems pretty far away, don’t you think? Sometimes we wonder about this just like John the Baptist did.

In the Second Reading for today, St. James is writing to believers who wondered where Jesus was. Jesus had said he was coming back, but no Jesus yet. He had said he would be with them always, but here they were plagued by poverty, prejudice, and persecution: Where was Jesus when they needed him? I guess we can relate to that. So the words James wrote aren’t just addressed to Christians in the first century but to all Christians and every Christian who wonders sometimes why Jesus seems far away—people like John the Baptist, people like us. James says to us:

When Jesus Doesn't Seem Near

Be patient: Stay clear of the traps

Be confident: Remember his mercy

1. James was a pastor at heart. He was also a pastor in reality. He shepherded the large Jerusalem congregation in the years after Pentecost. The members of that church were mostly Jewish Christians. Many of them fled Jerusalem after Stephen was stoned. They were living in the north country now and dealing with threats that came from Christ-haters like Saul of Tarsus (St. Paul to us). Pastor James understood people. He knew their lives were tough; he understood where their questions were coming from. He wrote what we'd expect him to write: **Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.** The Bible is packed with that kind of talk. The Lord is near: Watch and wait. Be patient is a theme we hear again and again.

But James adds something we might not expect: **Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!** The pastor in James understood what happens when people waiting for Jesus need to be patient. They fall into traps. The problem here seems to be infighting; people were blaming one another for their problems. Arguments broke out, accusations were made, angry people drew lines in the sand. The point is obvious: Jesus is coming back as Savior, James wrote, but he also coming back as judge. Cut the blame game out!

When Jesus doesn't seem near, people tend to fall into those traps. Remember the situation with John the Baptist? **When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"** The trap of doubt, right? John had said so many good words about Jesus: He is the one greater than I, John said, The one whose sandals I am unfit to untie, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He did everything for Jesus. But now John was in prison and destined for death—and Jesus was very far away. We're not sure if John wondered himself or if he sent his disciples because they were wondering, but uncertainty and doubt are traps Christians can fall into when Jesus doesn't seem near.

Christmas is two weeks away. But there may be times between now and then when we stare at the Christmas tree and watch the lights and hear the carols and wonder where Jesus is. Where is Jesus in my life? Where is Jesus in the world around me? Sometimes Jesus doesn't seem near. We need to beware of the traps: the trap of complaining when life goes bad; the trap of doubting when troubles arise; the trap of impatience when solutions are slow; the trap of wanting Jesus to be the Jesus we want him to be instead of the Jesus he actually is. The actual Jesus is coming again. Be patient. Have courage and stay clear of the traps. Watch and wait. Jesus knows what he's doing and he's closer than you think.

2. Easier said than done right? Tell an excited five-year-old or a bored teenager to be patient and we'll see how that works. James knows it. So instead of looking ahead he had them look back. **Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about.** The Jewish Christians knew their Bible history. They knew about Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Daniel and all the rest. They knew the prophets kept looking to the future even when they were rejected, imprisoned, and exiled. Their patience paid off and the promised Messiah finally arrived. They certainly knew about Job. Job lost everything: his wealth, his land, his family, and then for years he sat alone in poverty and grief. But his patience paid off when the **Lord restored Job's fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before.** You can be confident, James wanted to say. **The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.** Be patient and the Lord will come just as he did with Job and just as he did with the prophets.

And just he did with John the Baptist. John's disciples came to Jesus with their doubts and maybe even John's doubts. Jesus knew what they were thinking. He didn't point them ahead, he pointed them back: **Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.** Jesus took John's followers to the hills and valleys and roads and towns where he had preached and healed. He reminded them of the good news of his forgiveness and the convincing power of his miracles. Jesus meant to say: Look at my compassion and mercy. You and John can be confident that I am the one whom God promised to send.

A tumor shows up in a little boy's brain; a car is t-boned and a young father killed; a war rages and cities are leveled; a family is broken and can't be fixed; the diagnosis is in and its worse than we thought. Every one of those scenarios is taking place this Christmas. I won't do this, obviously, but I could name people right now who are experiencing them. To them and maybe to us Jesus sometimes seems far away even at Christmas. But this morning both James and Jesus urge us to remember the Savior's mercy. When you look at the lights, remember the glory that shone over Bethlehem's fields. When you look at the tree, remember the tree where Jesus died to forgive your sins. When you hear the carols remember the angels in heaven who rejoice over one sinner who repents and turns to Christ. When you sit down for dinner remember the promise that we will enjoy the marriage feast of the Lamb in heaven. And when you open your gifts remember God's indescribable gift who is at your side and in control even when he seems far away. And he is coming again. You can be certain and you can be sure. Amen.