

**Sunday, December 11, 2022**  
**Third Sunday of Advent (Year A)**

Matthew 11.2-11

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1132464544069912>

*(Sermon begins at about 16:40)*

**“Actions Speak Louder Than Words”**

Most, if not all, of us, are familiar with the old saying, “actions speak louder than words.” The recognition that just because someone says something does not necessarily make it true; particularly when it comes to how they live their own life. It’s easy to make statements about one’s beliefs, one’s position on particular issues, even one’s actions. Whether they are true or not is another matter entirely. The only way to ascertain the veracity of such statements is by observing the actions of the individual in question. Are their actions consistent with their pronouncements? Perhaps the questionable nature of some people’s words relative to their actions is what gave rise to another well-known saying: “talk is cheap.” That you can say whatever you want, but it’s your actions that reveal the truth of what you believe, of who you are.

We see a demonstration of this in today’s Gospel reading. John the Baptist has been thrown in prison by King Herod Antipas. John sends a message to Jesus: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” We don’t know why John, the one sent to “prepare the way of the Lord,” the one who pointed the way to Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, is now questioning whether Jesus is indeed the Messiah. Perhaps, as his own life hangs in the balance, he is becoming impatient. Jesus has been out doing ministry for awhile now, but Israel seems no closer to liberation. The kingdom of God seems no nearer than when John first baptized Jesus in the River Jordan and witnessed God’s proclamation of Jesus as his Son, the Beloved. In an age when would-be messiahs were popping up left and right, John’s question is a valid, even timely, one.

So, John’s disciples go to Jesus and ask him pointblank: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” A simple enough question. But Jesus does not answer John’s question directly. He knows that, regardless of whether he really is the Messiah or not (spoiler alert, he is), he could just as easily have said that he is the Messiah and be done with it. And while that may have answered John’s question, would it really have satisfied John’s concern? Would that have really proven anything? The answer is “no.” Instead, Jesus gives a brilliant response: “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.” In other words, look at what Jesus has been doing since he was baptized by John. He’s been busy preaching the good news. But beyond the proclaiming of some hopeful and hope-filled words, he has been putting those words into action. Healing the sick and infirmed. Casting out demons. Restoring people to health and wholeness. Even raising the dead. If that’s not proof enough, I don’t know what is.

Jesus' response is not only masterful in that it invites those inquiring to listen to his words, to look at his actions past and present. The very words he uses, the picture he paints with those words, would have sent a powerful message to John and all those present about the truth of who Jesus is. That Jesus is indeed the one who is to come. Specifically, Jesus' words are carefully chosen from various images used by the Prophet Isaiah. Images that Jesus' audience would have been very familiar with. Images they would have been fervently holding on to as the hope for their future. Images they would have been fervently holding on to as the promise for their future. Jesus' use of Isaiah's vision is carefully and cleverly nuanced, to emphasize the various layers of hope and promise that point to Jesus as Messiah.

The images from Isaiah are meant to be a recollection of what God has already done thus far in the course of salvation history. Written during the time of the Babylonian Exile some six centuries before Jesus, the oracles seek to promise and reassure the people of Judah that they would be liberated and returned to their homeland. A time that would be characterized by the rebuilding of Judean society, and most importantly, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and the return to proper worship of God that the people were unable to do while in Exile. Restoration that was figuratively represented by images of the return to health contained in Isaiah's oracles. For this would indeed be the restoration of the political, social, and religious health of the nation of Judah and of the Jewish people. Liberation and restoration that are historical fact. Actions speaking louder than words. The message to Jesus' hearers would have been that they had been under oppression before and had been liberated. It happened before, it will happen again. That is God's promise.

For Isaiah's prophecies were not just about the end of Exile and the restoration of the nation of Judah. His oracles also foretold, were also a foreshadowing of the larger plan that God has for the ultimate liberation of all God's people and the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. A plan that would entail such actions, such signs, as the restoration of health and wholeness to all God's beloveds. A plan that would be accomplished through the coming of God's anointed, the Messiah. With respect to this foreshadowing of God's kingdom, the message to Jesus' hearers would have been that if God fulfilled the promised of Judah's restoration following Exile, he will surely fulfill his promise about the coming of his kingdom. And that he would do that through his Messiah. The Messiah who, even now, is engaged in actions that will make that fulfillment a reality: the blind receiving their sight; the lame walking; the lepers being cleansed; the deaf being able to hear; the dead being raised; and the poor and marginalized being given the good news that God is turning things upside down, that God is making all things new. In short, that Jesus' doing these things is a foretaste of what is to come—of the transformation and wholeness that God's kingdom will hold.

Of course, everything changed with Jesus' death and resurrection. Irrefutable proof that he is indeed the Messiah. Again, actions speak louder than words. But that is not the end of the story. As we have talked, the season of Advent is an intentional time of anticipation of and preparation for the coming of the Messiah. At his birth, which we celebrate in a mere two weeks' time. And in his eventual return at the end of the ages, bringing the fulfillment of the kingdom he foretold and heralded in his response to John the Baptist's question.

John's question to Jesus is about more than whether he is the one who is to come. It really is at the heart of our Christian faith in general and our commemoration of Advent in particular. It is at the heart of our Christian faith in that we recognize that our faith is expressed in both word and action. We need both. The words of Scripture, the words that Jesus uttered in his teachings, all contain important messages about the love of God and who we are as God's beloved children. These, along with the words of our worship inspire and energize us for the ongoing work of building the kingdom of God. But to those who have not yet experienced the love of God firsthand, the words are, more often than not, just rhetoric. They need to be substantiated with something more tangible. With actions that demonstrate the true meaning of the words we hold so dear. Because our actions speak louder than our words.

Which leads directly to John's question being at the heart of Advent. His question is a recognition that what we do by way of ministry is so much more than helping those in need. It is so much more than demonstrating the love of God in tangible, meaningful ways. It is about doing our part to help bring the kingdom of God to fulfillment here and now. To anticipate, to foreshadow the coming of that kingdom. To provide signs of hope for that kingdom and to proclaim the promise of the coming of that kingdom in its fulness when the Messiah returns at the Second Coming.

Jesus himself as much as says so in today's Gospel reading. After addressing John's question, he continues with some cryptic language about John the Baptist himself. Or rather, about those who seemed to be so enthralled with John and his message. "What did you go out to the wilderness to look at?" Effectively going on to ask them if they went out because they were looking for some source of entertainment, or if they went out because they found something of value in John's message of turning to a new way of life and all that that means. "What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Yes, John was a prophet pointing the way to the Messiah. A valuable role, to be sure. Perhaps the most significant role for a prophet. A role he fulfilled brilliantly. Jesus' own actions are a testament to that. And yet, as Jesus says, "the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Because while John's work of pointing the way is done, there is still the work of preparing the way for the return of the Messiah and the ongoing work of helping bring about the fulfillment of God's kingdom. That is our job. Now, we are the ones being sent as Christ's messengers, through our words and particularly our actions, to prepare the way for his coming among us, now and in the age to come.