

Matthew 11:2-11

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev Samantha Evans

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## **A Questioning, Longing Touch**

For the past several years, I've been seeing a spiritual director. I call it "therapy for my soul." Something I've learned about myself is that when times are good, when things are going well, and my soul isn't particularly troubled, I will look at an upcoming appointment, and think, "Ah, I don't really have anything going on. This session might be kind of pointless."

Last week, when I met with my spiritual director, this is the way I was feeling. I woke up thinking, things are going really great. I'm feeling energized and hopeful. Advent plans are falling into place. Christmas and my birthday are right around the corner. There's only good stuff happening, so of course, I felt like I didn't really have anything to talk about.

And then, my spiritual director opened with a poem by Jan Richardson. In it, Jan contrasts what it's like to walk in day versus the night. And she says that in the nighttime, because we cannot see, we have to use our other senses: our hearing, our tasting, our smelling, and our questioning, longing touch.

Our questioning, longing touch.

This phrase stuck with me, as I imagined myself moving through the world, moving through my life, most of the time, without the ability to really see where I'm going. I've never really been able to see where I am going. I have always relied on my other senses, stumbling along with the help of a questioning, longing touch.

I had this vision of being bowed over. One hand on my heart, one hand spread out in front of me. And anguish spreads over my face and I am overcome with a longing and a need, desperate to touch something, anything, which might guide my next step.

As I sat with this image of myself, I began to smile, for I came to realize on this particular morning, in this particular Advent, during this particular season in my life, I still find myself in this posture. Bent forward, one hand to heart, one hand reaching out. My face is not bowed down nor is it contorted in anguish. This time, I am experiencing this longing from a place of joy! Pure, unadulterated joy!

I explained to my spiritual director the experience I had while contemplating these words. And I said to her, "I feel joy. And frankly, I don't know what to do with that." To which she laughed and said, "Yes, yes you do."

You see, it's not that I've never felt joy or happiness or peace. Quite the contrary. However, I've always said that the season of Advent most clearly reflect the reality of the broken world we live in. The world exists in a perpetual state of Advent, longing and waiting for healing and peace, and feeling uncertain when or if our waiting will ever end.

And I appreciate Advent, because it is a season which validates those feelings we all have from time to time. During the season of Advent, we are reminded that it makes sense that we would feel a bit desperate. That we would be bent over, longing to touch something, anything, that might guide or reassure us.

So, imagine my surprise when instead of being overcome with longing, all I can feel is joy!

Now before you get mad at me for being foolishly joyful, let me just say that I am trying to pretend that everything is good and wonderful and perfect. Because it's not. Even if everything in my life felt great, I still would not and could not ignore the pain and suffering in our community, in our city, in our world.

I still feel this longing. My hand is still outstretched, seeking to touch something. It's just in this particular season of my life, I feel a sense of assurance that my hand will land on something solid, and this gives me immeasurable joy.

While sitting in jail, John the Baptist received word about what Jesus had been doing. And he responded by asking him, "Are you the one?" Are you the one we have been waiting for? Or are we to wait for another?

When I first read this, this past week, I felt confused. Like, is this John, like The Baptist, John? The one who leapt in his mother's womb when Mary greeted his mother? The one "wore clothing of camel's hair...[and ate] locusts and wild honey."<sup>1</sup> This one, asking, "Are you the one?"

It's hard to picture this wildly faithful man doubting Jesus, his cousin, whom he knew even before birth, whom he baptized, about whom John himself heard a voice from heaven say: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:4

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3:17.

John the Baptist knew that Jesus was the one. But imprisonment does terrible things to the human soul. Cut off from his people, unable to see and experience for himself the healing and wholeness Jesus was offering their community. Bowed over in anguish, with a questioning, longing touch, John cries out, “Are you the one? Are you the one?”

The most comforting part of this text is that Jesus doesn’t scold John. “Go back and assure him,” says Jesus, “Go back and tell him all of the things that are happening: the blind are receiving their sight, the lame are walking, the lepers are being cleansed, the deaf are receiving the message, the dead are being raised, and the poor are having good news brought to them.”

“Go back and assure him,” says Jesus, “and remind him that blessed is he who does not take offense at me.” This is word of comfort to his friend John. Herod locked him up on account of Jesus, but Jesus sends words to him, assuring him that he has done what is right and good. That he is being faithful, and that in the end, he will be blessed, not Herod, the one who has locked him up.

Jesus doesn’t stop there though, he turns to the crowd and he defends John. He lifts him up as this great prophet. He admits that he’s not perfect; he’s still only human, born of woman. But he is still great. He is still a part of the movement. He is still worthy, and he is still loved.

On the first Sunday of Advent, the New York Times published an article by an Anglican Priest named Tish Harrison Warren. The title of this article is *Before Christmas, Face the Darkness*. This is the Rev. Warren’s plea to keep the longing and despair in Advent. Not to rush ahead to the joy of the morning of Christmas, because there is great value in first facing the night of Advent.

This is what she says:

Our response to the wrongness of the world (and of ourselves) can often be an unhealthy escapism, and we can turn to the holidays as anesthesia from the pain as much as anything else. We need collective spaces, as a society, to grieve—to look long and hard at what is cracked and fractured in our world and in our lives. Only then can celebration become deep, rich and resonant, not as a saccharine act of delusion but as a defiant act of hope.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that to have joy in the midst of suffering is not a denial of one’s circumstances but a defiant act of hope that this suffering will not overcome us. It

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<sup>3</sup> Tish Harrison Warren, “Before Christmas, Face the Darkness,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2019, pg.7.

will it persist forever. For as the Psalmist says, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."<sup>4</sup>

John's experience in jail, and Jesus' response, reveals the grace of Advent. It gives us permission to have our doubts, when we are lost in the night of Advent. When we are unable to see or understand what is happening. When we are feeling cut off and in need of reassurance, when we are bowed over in despair, when we are moving through the world using only a questioning, longing touch. Christ will extend to us a word of comfort that is sure to bring us joy.

For whatever reason, my friends, I am feeling this joy. And my spiritual director was right, I do know what to do with it. And that is to share it. If you're feeling imprisoned, bowed over, uncertain of tomorrow, let me tell you that I have been where you are. I'm sure I'll be there again. But I know that it will not and does not last forever.

And I know that sometimes, we can't see it, but truly, miracles are happening all around us: the blind are receiving their sight, the lame are walking, the lepers are being cleansed, the deaf are receiving the message, the dead are being raised, and the poor are having good news brought to them. Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Triune God, who Creates, Sustains, and Redeems us all. AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 30:5.