

Sermon [John the Baptist; prophets; doubt]
Advent 3 Cycle A
Text: **Matthew 11:2–11**

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In 1976, I was ordained in the former American Lutheran Church as a Pastor called to serve an inner city congregation in Phoenix, Arizona. The core thinking and theology of the Lutheran Church is that God calls an individual into the ministry, and I sensed that call when I prepared to enter seminary, but the call of God is confirmed by the decision of the people in a church.

A few months afterward, writer and director Larry Cohen released a horror film based in New York City in which the police are investigating a series of murders being committed by various random, seemingly normal people. Actor Tony LoBianco plays the role of a Catholic police detective who is trying to solve these murders. The name of the film was **“God Told Me to Kill.”**

You and I probably don’t need to have an in-depth conversation to arrive at the *same* conclusion here. People who commit murders and think that *God told them to* are deranged. They are mentally ill, if not worse. And theologically, they are misguided and deluded. God, you and I would believe, does not tell individuals to commit murder, or to blow themselves up in a suicide bombing, or for that matter, to start wars. What we know and believe about God does not include hatred or violence. If God speaks directly to individuals, it is not to go off on their own and do *anything* which is radically out-of-synch with the life of Jesus or the Sermon on the Mount.

Yet this phrase “God Told Me To,” is not unknown in our culture. Whether in dreams, or some kind of vision, or because they saw it on TV, there are people who are certain God is telling them to do something. Unfortunately, it is more likely to do something harmful rather than, say, tithe or pray or go to church!

As Lutherans, we are well-grounded in the Scriptures, so our faith has ancient roots. And one of the two strong legs of the Holy Scriptures, along with the Law of Moses, is the tradition of the Prophets. Prophets were a company of almost self-appointed individuals who sensed deep within their spirits, not only that they had a message to deliver to the people, but that God told them to deliver that message. A prophet was one who knew that when he or she spoke (and there were well-known women prophets I might add), it really wasn’t the prophet speaking, but God speaking through them.

When you sit in church, this doesn’t seem particularly subversive. But it is dangerously close to the horror film by Larry Cohen I just mentioned, and to psycho-types who sometimes fill our streets and homeless shelters, and who all too easily buy assault weapons. Already this month, we have had three very tragic mass shootings, in Omaha Nebraska and near Denver Colorado, by individuals who were sadly deranged, and whose heads were filled with demonic thoughts, not prophetic utterances.

My question is, how do you know? I don’t mean, how does the public know a psycho from a prophet. I am asking, how does an individual know that the promptings and the thoughts, visions and experiences are from God, or not?

Today’s readings focus upon and celebrate the role of the great Prophets of the Lord. And the Litany we prayed together incorporates the words of the great prophet Isaiah, and those of Zechariah, the priest who was the husband of Elizabeth and father of John the Baptist. If we could step back into their times, into their towns and into their company, can we at least sense or feel how difficult it might be for an individual who is moved or somehow touched by a spiritual awareness, to be sure that it is God speaking to them, or God attempting to speak through them.

As a pastor, I wrestle with this constantly, and have since that first day, as a teenager, that my pastor suggested to me that perhaps God was calling me into the ministry of the church. I wrestle with how I discern what are my thoughts, and what is God's word, what is only my foolish thinking, and what is that word of truth and grace which the Spirit of God may choose to speak through me.

Today's Gospel passage is especially relevant because it tells the story of John the Baptist at the end of his life. He has spoken as a prophet to prepare the way for the coming Messiah, he called people to repentance, baptized the people of Israel in the waters of the Jordan as a sign of their purification and desire to return to God. But he had spoken as a prophet once too many times, in denouncing King Herod for his murderous and adulterous ways, and for this he has been put in prison.

As Andrew Kodresciu once remarked about life under Communism: "It is not true that we do not have freedom of speech in Soviet Union. We have freedom of speech. We just don't have freedom *after* speech."

John the Baptist lost that freedom. His public ministry of calling the people to repentance *ended* when he also called the King to repentance. John had believed, felt, *known* that God had told him to say these things, and yet Here is the huge uncertainty of it all and yet even at this time, John sends a message from prison to his cousin Jesus:

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples³ and said to him, "**Are you the one who is to come**, or are we to wait for another?"

This interests me because there's nothing supernatural going on here. There is no story that an angel suddenly appeared out of a solid wall and told John, "Yes, he's the one. He is the Messiah, the Savior that the people have been waiting for." We are in a dark and dreary prison cell. John must know that he is at the end of his life—the life he had dedicated to preparing the way for the Lamb of God, for the Messiah or Anointed One whom he believed God was going to send to redeem the people of Israel. But at this very momentous hour, John has nothing to rely on – no voice, no miracle, no angel, no shining ray of light, no "special effects" to tip him off.

Like us today, he is waiting for a word from the Lord. He is waiting and listening and asking for some guidance, some clear answer to a lifetime question. "Are you the One who is to come. Or are we to wait for another?" Is Jesus the One for whom generations of the faithful had longed, or is it somebody else after all?

Don't think for a minute that this is irrelevant. People today are still searching, still asking. Visitors who come here, or total strangers who read our web site, or who Google for spiritual ideas and insights and *connections* are looking for something real and vital for their lives. Chances are *you* are searching, hoping, wanting to find the light which guides you, or the path which is not twisted or leads you in the wrong direction.

Our times are filled with competing voices, all offering us some measure of truth, or are selling something they want to pass off as truth. God knows the Christian faith is not the only show in town. Are you confused, puzzled? Try Islam—there's a mosque not far from here. Or the Vedanta society; a Jewish synagogue, or the Self-Realization Fellowship. There are any number of "–ologies" and "–isms." How do you *know*?

If anything we understand the question of the prophet we call John the Baptist. "Are you the one, Jesus, or are we to wait for another?"

I can only answer for myself — that, as far as I am concerned, there has never been another, from John's time until my time — no prophet, no guru, no celebrity personality, no spiritual leader or

teacher — who comes close to Jesus Christ.

I must remind you of the role of the prophet of God. John is the best example we could want, since he was self-effacing. Down by the river he had admitted, confessed, to his disciples that he was not the One from God, but only his messenger. He was not the Messiah, the savior whom the people awaited, but only “a voice crying the wilderness,” warning the people to make their paths straight, to open a spiritual superhighway, if you will, to speed God’s anointed on his way to them.

But even in the midst of such dramatic certainty, this prophet of God lived with doubt. Like him, you and I live with doubt. But it is a doubt which Jesus recognizes, because he knows that God is with us even in our questions and our doubts. Pastor Don Koepke keeps reminding us that what brings us together here is not that we are members, or life-long Lutherans, but that we are all *seekers*. We belong here if the only thing we come with is the knowledge that we are seeking spiritual meaning together. And together, we pose this timeless question to God above: Is Jesus the one? Or should we try out some other religion, some other cult, some other insight?

Here is Jesus’ answer: “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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

The prophetic tradition amazes me *not* because the prophets are described as “men of God” — and some women of God — who were absolutely certain that God told them to do something or to go somewhere or say something, but because they learned to listen, to watch, to wait on the Lord, to discern truth and sort it out from the false and the phoney. They were the people who knew God’s will because they developed the patience to understand what is spiritual and sort it from what is ephemeral. If you were to read every single part of the Hebrew Scriptures that mentions a prophet, you would find that much of their testimony centered on the actions of the kings and leaders and what they were up to. They spoke to rulers and judges with authority, “Thus says the Lord.”

But only some of them, late in the life of the nation of Israel—only some of them discerned the word of God in their heart or their ears that the Word of God would come in the flesh. That God’s promised Savior, Prince of Peace, Righteous Branch, Son of David, Messiah, Priest and King, would come to save his people. Only some of them learned not to look at the affairs of the day but to fix their eyes on the horizon, and to seek understanding of what God’s big purpose would be, and whom God would anoint to cause his will to be done.

Christians believe, I believe, you believe that John was the last great prophet — not because he had no doubts, but because when he heard the word of the Lord, he knew and he understood: “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.”

Jesus knew this takes discernment. “And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me,” he says. His is a gentle rule, a guiding light that does not blind, a redeeming presence that does not condemn, a healing presence that does no harm, but calls us to trust, to live by faith, to straighten the paths in the wilderness so that the world may come to him, and to announce the coming of Good News. Amen.