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 St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Newton
 Advent; Primary Text: Matthew 11:2-11
 7 December 2025

You really can't go through the church season of Advent
 without encountering John the Baptizer.

When we meet John in the Gospel according to Matthew,
 he is in the wilderness,
 far away from the powers that be in Jerusalem,
 dressed in camel skins, living on locusts and honey.

All four Gospel accounts agree that John baptizes Jesus,
 That John proclaims the arrival of God's kingdom
 to anyone who would listen— and many who would not

John shows no doubt that Jesus is the one for whom he and others have been waiting.
 John the Baptizer knows that Jesus is the one for whom he is preparing the way.

He says, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
 Bear fruit worthy of repentance."

And this: "His winnowing fork is in his hand,
 and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather
 wheat into the granary;
 but the chaff he will burn
 with unquenchable fire."

That's the Gospel reading we were supposed to hear today.
 The certain, bordering on arrogant man.

We hear it every year. This version of John is in all four Gospels.
 This is not a man hedging his bets.

This is not someone playing it safe.
 All of John's eggs are in one basket,
 and that basket is Jesus.

The Gospel reading you have in your bulletin is meant for next Sunday.

King Herod has imprisoned John because John said something he didn't like.

John sends some of his followers to ask Jesus,

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

John, bless his heart, and I mean that in the nice way,
 asks, "Has it all been for nothing?"

John expresses this uncertainty only in Matthew, only in Luke, .

So we don't get to hear it every year.

We will have Advent Lessons and Carols next Sunday,

so we would not have heard it this year.

And I wanted all of us to hear it because it is so important.

So here we are.

It is important because though John's question is deeply personal, it is not unique.

Has it all been for nothing, Ellen wondered when the high school

discontinued the Latin program she spent her professional career building.

Has it all been for nothing, Karen, a career public servant asked,

while witnessing much of the legislation and programs

She spent decades championing and building

be dismantled and gutted.

Has it all been for nothing,

when one bad grade pulls down your average an alarming amount.

Has it all been for nothing, when IVF fails again.

Note how Jesus responds to poor John when he questions him.

Jesus does not chide or shame John.

Instead, Jesus asks the disciples to tell John

what they have seen and what they have heard:

"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 does not invent this list.

He's quoting, which he LOVES to do in Matthew. He's quoting the Tanakh.

Isaiah 35 and 61, which we will hear next week in Advent Lessons & Carols.

Jesus does not include the prisoner going free.

And with that John knows his earthly fate is sealed.

And it is. This faithful man dies a meaningless,

grotesque death that makes a mockery of

everything he stood for.

And yet here is John, on our bulletin cover, smiling.

And this isn't a before and after

He hears the news of God at work and smiles.

He understands that this is happening differently
than he thought it would,

And he somehow— somehow— manages

To find joy in that, regardless of
what it does or does not

Mean for him John in this earthly life.

And this is the beautiful, difficult gift John and Matthew gives us in this passage,
a gift we may not want to unwrap all of the time, or even most of the time,

but a gift nonetheless because it is the truth,

that thing we all seek and seems in such short supply these days:

We do not get to pick where, when, and how God is at work.

We do not get to choose when, how, or if

our work comes to fruition in our lifetimes.

See: John the Baptizer. See also: Moses.

When John doubts, Jesus does not point towards transformed institutions.

Jesus does not describe how systems have become less oppressive.

Jesus points to people, people whose lives have been changed. .

To events that are indeed life changing

for the people to whom they happen.

God **is** at work, Jesus tells John .

Has it all been for nothing?

Ellen's hundreds of Latin students had many chances

to practice discipline and persistence in her classes.

Their lives were different because of Ellen, my aunt Sis.

Nothing can change that.

Has it all been for nothing?

Karen affected even more people, countless folks who benefitted

from the laws passed and programs built by her career.

Their lives were different because of Karen, my dear friend's mom.

Nothing can change that.

This Advent, like John,
we can choose to eschew false hope, false peace, false joy when in pain.
Instead, we can bring our despair to God
We can ask the difficult question.
And we can to look and listen again
for small yet real signs of the divine presence,
even if, maybe especially if, right,
it's not what we want them to be.

Has it all been for nothing?
No. God is still at work.
Amen.