When Questions Become Prayer

Matthew 11:2–11
Advent 3A

John had always been certain.

From the day he stepped out of the wilderness, with hair shaped by wind and voice honed by hunger and honey, he preached as if fire burned in his bones. “Prepare the way. Make straight the paths. Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

People travelled long distances to hear him because he spoke like the prophets of old. He sounded like someone who believed that God still spoke, and that hope could still be born in difficult places.

But now John sits in a prison cell, and the fire that once fuelled him has grown thin.

He had spent his life preparing the way for the Messiah. He had called people to turn toward God with courage. He had stood in the river and baptized Jesus himself.

Yet now the long road of his calling has brought him to a stone room, heavy chains, and a silence he cannot control. The wilderness had been a spacious place that held the sky. This cell feels like a wilderness that presses in from all sides.

And in this confinement, a new thought begins to whisper.

John, who once sounded so sure, now wonders.

We do not often picture him as someone who questioned. We imagine him strong and steady, pointing toward the Messiah with absolute confidence. Yet the gospel gives us a different image. John sends his disciples to Jesus with a question that feels fragile and frightened.

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

It is one of the most honest questions in scripture. It is the kind of question that rises when life no longer follows the path we expected.

I imagine John carrying that question inside himself for days. He may have tried to silence it, reminding himself of what he had seen at the Jordan. He had witnessed Jesus step into the river. He had heard the voice from heaven. He had pointed and said, “Here is the Lamb of God.” Surely someone who saw such things should not doubt.

Yet doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt often arrives when faith is trying to grow.

Eventually John speaks the truth he can no longer avoid. He sends his disciples to Jesus and lets the question rise like a stone he has held too long.

“Tell me I have not spent my life pointing in the wrong direction.”

This, too, is Advent.

Sometimes Advent is candlelight and stillness. Sometimes Advent is a season of waiting that feels tender and beautiful. Yet sometimes Advent looks like this moment in John’s cell, when the

darkness feels deeper than we expected and the questions refuse to stay buried.

Is God still with me?
Is the world still redeemable?
Does love still matter?
Have I misread everything?
Are you the One, or have I hoped in vain?

A real faith does not hide these questions. A real faith speaks them aloud and trusts that God can hold them.

When John's disciples reach Jesus, Jesus does not criticize the question. He does not rebuke John for wavering. He does not say, "Remember what you saw before." He meets the question with the language of healing and life.

"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.
The poor receive good news."

Jesus does not answer with a title or a creed. He answers with transformation. He offers evidence that the world is being healed from the inside out.

It is as if Jesus is saying:

"John, you recognized me once by the river.
But do not depend on old certainty.
Look at what is happening now.

Look at lives being restored.
Look at courage rising among the poor.
Look at mercy taking root in unlikely places.
This is how you will know me."

For those of us who long for absolute clarity, Jesus' answer can feel both comforting and incomplete. He does not give John a clean sentence of certainty. He gives him signs of life. Healing is happening. Liberation is unfolding. Hope is rising. And this is enough to trust.

This is also how most of us come to know God.
Not through one dramatic moment but through many small signs.
Not through perfect clarity but through a quiet invitation to notice what is being mended.

A bitter heart softens.
A broken relationship begins to heal.
Someone finds the courage to take the next step.
A community chooses compassion over fear.

Each moment becomes a clue. Christ is near. Christ is working. Christ has not given up on the world.

It comforts me that Jesus honours John's fragile question. It comforts me even more that he honours the ones who ask questions today.

We all have prisons of one kind or another. Some are literal. Many are not. Some are built from anxiety or grief. Some are shaped by exhaustion or past harm. Some are made of expectations we cannot meet or wounds we carry quietly.

In these places the questions rise.
Is God still good?
Is love still possible?
Is there still a path forward?

Advent invites us not to deny these questions but to lift them up with honesty. The holiest faith is not the faith that hides doubt. The holiest faith is the one that carries its doubt to Jesus.

Jesus then says something astonishing. He tells the crowd, "Among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John."

Not John the unshakable.
Not John the unwavering.
John the questioner.

Greatness in God's eyes is not measured by perfect certainty. Greatness is measured by the willingness to seek truth even in the dark. Greatness is found in the courage to ask what our hearts fear to ask.

John, who dared to speak the question, is honoured.
John, who could no longer pretend, is lifted up.
John, who reached for hope from a prison cell, is praised by the One he longed for.

This is good news for every person whose faith feels tender.

John's question still echoes today. We live in a world that contains real suffering. There is loneliness, injustice, and grief. There are false promises and broken systems. Many people are waiting for a sign that goodness still has a future.

Jesus gives the same answer he gave then.

Look for life.
Look for mercy.
Look for justice.
Look for hope rising where you did not expect it.
Look for the poor being lifted.
Look for compassion that refuses to disappear.

This is how you will know Christ.

Perhaps this is the gift of the third Sunday of Advent.
Not that we become more certain.
But that we become more open.

Christ meets us, not in our polished confidence, but in our honest wondering. The candle of joy that we light today is not a bright cheerfulness we must manufacture. It is the quiet joy that arrives when we discover that God does not withdraw from our questions. God moves closer.

God sits with us in the cell.
God receives the questions we barely admit to ourselves.
God holds our doubts without fear.
And then something begins to stir. A pulse of healing. A breath of courage. A small light that grows.

“Tell John what you hear and see,” Jesus says.

Tell him the world is still being made new.
Tell him hope has not abandoned him.
Tell him the One he has been waiting for is already here, moving steadily toward life.

Amen.