

# St. Margaret's Uniting Church

## Mooroolbark

### Sunday December 11th, 2016 - Advent 3

READINGS Matthew 11:2-11 & James 5:7-10

What do you see?

We are in a season of waiting, and from James we have heard the need to be patient, for the coming of the Lord. Be patient, like the farmer who waits for the precious crop. Be patient waiting for the early and late rains. Be patient through years of drought. Be patient through a flooded Spring. Be patient.

I've always struggled to be patient. I'm happy to say I'm better at it now than I've ever been, but it remains a challenge. M. Scott Peck tells a story that resonates with me. He begins from a position of having always considered he was a poor mechanic. He recalls that one day a client was stuck after an appointment because her car handbrake would not release. He tried to help and quickly got frustrated himself. But then he took some time, something he found difficult to do, and slowly took in the view from the handbrake lever and the mechanical chain it was connected to. Eventually his focus slowly on just those things showed where the problem was, and he was able to release the stuck handbrake.

It is hard to see things when we lack the patience for it. I don't know how farmers have patience to endure long droughts or untimely hail storms or floods. And perhaps too many run out of patience. I wonder how we all go when it comes to needing patience to be able to see and believe what God does?

How can we see what God does when this time of year adds an overlay of busyness on an already frantic life for many? How can we see what God does at this time of year when Christmas is challenging for many

families – through ongoing feuds, or grief and loss, or because of deep loneliness? What can people hope to see when illness, injustice, accidents, poverty, circumstances or natural disasters weigh heavily upon them?

If we struggle to see and believe, we are not alone. Last week we heard from one of the great prophets of Israel, and perhaps the last of the prophets. John the Baptist delivered a bold message about the one who was to come, whose shoelaces he was unworthy to tie. He was as bold as any of the prophets, 'prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight; get ready for the coming of the Messiah'.

But all that seems to have changed. A lot has happened between then and now. Where John was once bold and certain he now is riddled with doubt. It doesn't help that he is locked up and isolated in a dark prison cell. It doesn't help that he can't see for himself what is going on around the place. He probably hears half-truths, rumours about what Jesus is doing, and it is enough to send him to a dark place within.

It is hard to see from dark and lonely places. It is hard to be patient because time seems to stretch out into the abyss. John is not in a great place, but he is much like countless others who have found themselves in a deep hole.

One of our modern day saints, Mother Teresa knew this kind of struggle. In 1958 she wrote, 'My smile is a great cloak that hides a multitude of pains. People think that my faith, my hope and my love are overflowing and that my intimacy with God and union with his will fill my heart. If only they knew.' At another time she wrote of an even deeper crisis of faith. 'I feel that God does not want me, that God is not God and that he does not really exist' (Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light, Brian Kolodejchuck, Doubleday, 2007).

It might be shocking to hear of Mother Teresa's struggle given the way she lived and dedicated her life to those on the margins in Calcutta. Perhaps we consider her work to speak more loudly than the inner workings of doubt and struggle.

It is a similar struggle for John. And so he does about the only thing he can do from his prison cell – he sends messengers to Jesus with a question. ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ It is a dark and loaded question. All that John has stood for, all he has given his life for, and the very reason he is locked up, is called into question. It is a crisis of faith.

Jesus’ response is interesting. To the messengers he effectively says, ‘what do you see?’ It is an invitation to open their eyes. Perhaps this is why the world sees Mother Teresa as a saint rather than one struggling with inner demons. I want to protest: *But Mother Teresa, just look at what you have done, and how you have done it. Surely you can see that God is at work in the work of your hands and heart?*

Actually, oftentimes we cannot see because of what goes on inside. Often the doubts become such that we lose heart and perspective. And in those times we need messengers to do the seeing for us. John was right to send out messengers to Jesus. They are more than that – they are envoys. They become the locus for his doubt and questioning, but they return to be his eyes and his strength when he lacks these things.

Similarly we are right to protest against Mother Teresa’s inner demons for her sake. From the outside it is sometimes easier to see the work of God in the hands of one like her. All who struggle with the black dog of depression; all who struggle in dark places that they cannot fight out of; all who are locked in worlds of self-doubt or imprisoned because of others – all these need messengers, envoys, to see and hear, to witness and believe, to protest against the dark and to proclaim what our friends have lost capacity to hope for.

And so Jesus invites the messengers from John to look around and see. And to bring that vision back into the dark loneliness of prison.

*The blind can see, the lame now walk, those once lepers have been cleansed, those who were deaf can hear, those once dead find they now have life, and those who are poor hear good news beyond poverty.*

I wonder what you can see that sparks hope and life? Do you see the good that Mother Teresa has done and want to proclaim it as good news for her sake and for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Do you see things in your own life that speak to something greater, even if it is in small things, just one step at a time? Have you ever been surprised at a visit from one who seems like an angel; or one who speaks a profound word just when you needed that word? Have you ever been lifted up and encouraged in a way that you feel there must be a divine hand behind it? Have you ever dreamed dreams or seen visions of love or hope that have carried you beyond where you once had been?

What do you see?

James reminds us that it takes the patience of a farmer to see the precious crops. Jesus is reminding John that patience is needed in order to truly see the miracles that unfold before us.

We heard earlier of Mary's song of joy that she should be chosen to birth the Messiah. I think it is a miracle that she can be joyous with such news, that she can see this as good for her, for Joseph, for the world.

Can we sing with joy like Mary who knows blessing within, when it is not apparent from the outside? Can we see that God breaks into our skin and flesh and bones too; that God breaks into our heart and soul? Can we see despite the prisons that lock us in, and hear the promise from Jesus via the messengers? *The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead have life, the poor hear good news...*

I want to join Mary and sing with joy. I want to sing because her song lifts me up. I want to sing for those who cannot sing. I want to sing as protest against dark and lonely places; as hope breaking into locked places.

Let us sing as we witness; and let us sing for those who cannot sing; and proclaim life and hope for those who remain in tough spaces.

For love is born in strange and unlikely places. Love is born. Love is always born.