

If Jesus Himself got on the Jumbotron each week and proclaimed his message, the church would have no trouble growing. If he stood in front of the world and made himself known, if he performed his miracles and answered the prayers people sent to him, whether by silent thought or prepaid postage, then inviting our friends and neighbors, struggling with whatever is going on in their lives, it would be a no brainer. Heck, even if there was a draw and only one person from each city got their need met each Sunday, that's a lottery we'd all play.

If Jesus was Oprah, giving away swag bags under your pew, we'd need 5 services.

But because Jesus isn't Oprah, and he doesn't flaunt his power but instead hides it in a promise, we have one service, and the church as a whole is struggling to bring in new members to replace those leaving by death, death of person or of faith.

In last week's Gospel we saw John, revealed by Matthew to be the forerunner of the Messiah, preparing people to receive him by despairing of themselves. What we skipped over was John seeing Jesus and pointing to his cousin, declaring that He is the Lamb of God here to take away the sin of the world.

And before today's reading takes place, John opens his accusing mouth in the wrong place. He's faithful to condemn Herod and his familial relations, but John's faithfulness gets him imprisoned, convicted and sentenced to be beheaded.

So for John, faithful John the Baptizer, things go from bad to worse. You can only imagine him scratching away at the walls in the prison cell, counting each day he's in there but certain that with each tick, his saviour, whom he has faithfully led the way for, would burst into prison to fulfill the expected prophecies. Justice upon Herod for his sin and for this injustice, and surely the freeing of the captives, as Isaiah makes us expect.

If John is the Elijah to come before the saviour, then that means God has come.

And you and I know that to be true, but John was a little mixed in his understanding. He heard that Jesus was teaching with authority, preaching John's message of repentance and

following it up with a message of forgiveness and hope. And he was feeding the hungry and healing the sick and casting out demons and even raising the dead. And yet he was still captive, wrongfully imprisoned, simply doing the work of God.

So Jesus, are you really the one I should have been hoping in? Had I led the masses astray by pointing them to you?

His strong convictions seemed to be wavering, though some would aim to defend the courageous prophet by saying he only asks these questions to teach and lead his own disciples. But there's no need to pretend that John the Baptist had no questions or doubts; it doesn't negate his faith to acknowledge that it was still faith, a belief in that which was not fully seen or known or understood. The truth of the matter is, everything the Old Testament had prepared him for was only happening in part. Rather than political overhaul, Jesus is wandering around the wilderness working His wonders. He isn't convincing the religious leaders of the truth, nor is He destroying them because of their unfaithfulness, but He is fully satisfied to teach the nobodies about God's love and power. If they are the ones who will receive Him, then He will rejoice to share His gifts, His truths amongst them.

The eyes of some blind have been opened. Some lame men have begun leaping and some mute have opened their mouths to praise God at last, some of the dead have been raised, and as of yet, John's iron bars are still locked shut.

But Malachi prophesied that Elijah would come and precede the great and awesome day of the Lord, that this messenger would prepare the way for the God Himself, when He Himself would suddenly appear in His temple.

So Jesus reminds John that these prophecies were being fulfilled and he can rest easy, and He tells the people all around that John truly was the prophet to come before the Christ, Elijah, if you're so bold to believe it.

So if John is Elijah, and Jesus is fulfilling these promises of God, that means with certainty that God has entered the scene in order to save.

Which means I do not have to proclaim to you “strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart. Be strong; fear not. Behold you God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” No, all of that is true, but it is even truer now. Since Jesus has stepped into the fray following Elijah, who is John the Baptist, we may say that our God has come with vengeance. Our God has come to save you.

He has poured out His wrath upon that which threatened you, His beloved—your sin has been obliterated by the suffering of the cross and now you are saved, saved from whatever may lift its voice against you and threaten you with pain and suffering. He has shown His love to you, His power too, and He has given you faith to believe what you have heard that Jesus taught and did.

Which means that God has already worked the greatest miracle in that list in your life. As Jesus tells the disciples what to relay to John in his growing concern, the blind receiving sight and the lame walking is an impressive place to start in the list of miracles. And He adds to it leading up to what we would think is the grandest thing ever done—the dead are raised to life. That should be the stunning finale, the cherry on top of all Christ’s works, but no the true climax of Christ’s ministry, the sole goal of every other work and teaching of Christ is that the poor have good news preached to them.

And though many of us have not had Christ cleanse us of leprosy, nor has He miraculously straightened and strengthened many of our legs through a simple Word (though He has blessed many here with stronger bodies via the doctors and nurses He provides for us), the reality is that He has worked His miracle working power in each life who has ever walked

into these doors. And many have even heard and not been offended by the promise of Christ! God be praised.

Therefore on the days when you find yourself wishing Jesus was evident, walking among His people and making His power known, on the days when you'd just like Him to answer your prayers, thank you very much, Jesus points us back to Himself and His works, then and now, to remind you that He has already come to save you. In spite of how it all feels, in spite of what your reason and logic would tell you, the One who fulfilled prophecy in His time has indeed been here and finished His work so you can rest secure. Even through your suffering, even in your doubt.

This is tiring. You know that. I know that. Jesus knows that, hence why He had James preach the patience of today's Epistle.

Even after Christ has fulfilled His work and ascended to the Father, James still preaches that his hearers must remain patient until the coming of the Lord; they must wait with hope for the full fruit of Christ's work to be revealed. They are to strengthen their hearts rather than grow weak in the face of long waiting for His promises to be fulfilled. The Christian's job is to be long-suffering, trusting what is and what has been promised in spite of what one can see and feel. It is constantly turning our eyes away from what we can perceive, from what our lives scream in our faces, and trusting again in the Christ who lived and worked and died and rose and who even preached good news into our lives. He is the One who loved His world so much that He was born once in a manger, and who will reveal His power and grace and mercy when He returns at the last. Your God has come to save you; your God still comes to save you; and in one last glorious moment, your God will come to save you, and then you'll have no doubt about it.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.

