

“Are You the One?”

Matthew 11:1-6

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For our honeymoon, my husband and I were fortunate enough to spend some time in Italy. We could see the Alps towering over the horizon. They were like nothing I’ve ever seen before.

While there, I learned an amazing piece of history regarding those mountains. In 1848 construction began on a railroad pathway through a portion of the Alps called “The Semmering.” The goal was to connect Vienna with Venice, allowing for easy transportation of goods and people from the coast to interior Europe.

To no one’s surprise, many said it could not be done. The mountains were too steep. The risk of avalanche too great. The winter months too hard for construction, and the elevation far too high. But still, the project’s designer, Carl von Ghega, pressed on.

After seven years of construction, The Semmering rail line consisted of 14 tunnels, 16 viaducts, 100 stone arches, and 11 bridges. It had been worked on by 20,000 construction workers and been the cause of 700 casualties—including Carl himself. But finally, the project, once deemed impossible, was complete.¹ Europe had their first train track crossing of the Alps. I can only imagine the celebrations that ensued when the workers laid that final brick!

While the construction of this daunting project is more than impressive, the thing that amazed me the most about the Semmering, is the fact that when the Semmering rail pass was built, there was not a train in existence capable of making the trip. At the time that Carl von Ghega built the track, no trains could handle the steep elevation or the sharp turns through the mountains. Four different locomotives were tried and all four failed, forcing train companies to build and design a new train, with the strict goal of surviving that mountain pass.²

Those 20,000 workers from Austria, Italy, and Germany came together day after day after day in miserable conditions to build a track for a train that did not yet exist. Which can only mean that those construction workers truly believed, deep in their bones, that *someday* a train would come.

It takes a lot of hope to live like that. There are days when I have that much hope in the future, days where I feel like Carl von Ghega, days where I am confident that a train will come. But there are other days where hope feels out of reach, days where the rug has been pulled out from under me, days where I am more like John the Baptist in our text for today.

If you grew up going to Sunday school like I did, then you probably learned about John the Baptist at some point. You may have learned that John was a wil-

desert man, a man who wore camel hair and ate locust and honey. You may have learned that John was a preacher and a prophet, known for quoting Isaiah, saying, "Prepare the way of the Lord." Or you may have heard the story of John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River.

If you grow up going to Sunday school, then you've probably heard a John the Baptist story before, but chances are they didn't teach you this one. Chances are, they didn't tell you about John, the mighty prophet, struggling to hold onto hope.

Our text for today tells us that John the Baptist is locked away in prison. John publicly criticized Herod, the local ruler at the time, for marrying within Herod's own family. To no one's surprise, Herod didn't like the public scolding, so before too long, John finds himself in jail.

We don't know how long John's been there, or what the conditions are like. We don't know if he's hungry or scared, alone or crowded with unwelcome company. All we know is that at some point in that prison sentence, John sends a message to Jesus. He asks, "Are you the one we've been waiting for, or should we wait for another?"

"Are you the one ... or should we wait for another?" John isn't asking a simple "yes" or "no" question here. John is asking Jesus—*is it you, or was I wrong all this time?*

"Is it you, or will I die in this prison?"

"Is it you, or did I get my hopes up too quickly?"

"Jesus, is it you? Will the promised day ever come?"

It's the kind of question you ask when you are running out of hope. "Is it you, God, or should we wait for another?"

I imagine we all know that bottom of the barrel, low on hope kind of feeling. A few weeks back I was on the phone with Matt Conner, a talented pastor and friend of mine. Matt has two little boys, and the night before our phone call a big thunderstorm hit. As is common with toddlers, Matt's youngest son woke up to the sound of the storm and ran to his parent's room, seeking comfort.

The next morning, the boys were in the car together driving to day care, when Matt's son said out of the blue, "That storm was scary, Daddy." Matt agreed, "Yeah, it was scary, buddy." But then he added, "Just remember, you're always safe inside your house!" The little boy in the back seat thought about that for a moment, and then whispered quietly from his carseat in the back of the van, "But not outside." It was a question as much as it was a statement. He carried on, "Am I safe at church? At school?"

This conversation happened just a few days after the Nashville elementary school shooting. Matt's wife is a teacher. They had the news on in the house, watching the updates, sharing in our nation's communal fear. The boys had clearly seen it. Kids understand so much more than we realize sometimes! So when Matt said to his son, "you're always safe inside, buddy," his son added, "But not outside?"

Matt told me he didn't know how to answer his four-year-old son's question. He didn't know how to tell him that safety was not a guarantee. So he simply pulled his sunglasses down over his eyes to make sure the child in the backseat couldn't see him cry.

We know what it feels like to run out of hope. We know what it's like to think that the world is never going to change, that the train will never come, that the violence will never stop. Like John, we know what it feels like to want to run to Jesus and ask, "Is it you or should we wait for another? Jesus, is this the plan you had? Will it ever get better? Was I wrong all this time, or will the promised day ever come?" And that's why we *need* today's text.

I imagine John the Baptist was running low on hope when he sent that message to Jesus from inside his jail cell asking, "Are you the one?" I imagine John was wanting to cry out—"Jesus, is this the plan you had? Will it ever get better? Was I wrong all this time, or will the promised day ever come?"

And do you know how Jesus responded? Jesus responded by telling John what he saw. Jesus said, "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk." Jesus said, "the dead are raised, and the poor have good news." When John couldn't see the change, Jesus pointed the change out for him. When John couldn't hold onto hope, Jesus held onto it for him. When John could no longer imagine what a savior looked like, Jesus said, "Ask the blind, because they can see."

The text doesn't tell us what happens next, but my hope is that *this* is the moment when John rediscovers Jesus. My hope is that instead of allowing the jail cell bars to erode John's belief in Christ, John listened to his friend and rediscovered Christ all over again. For there are days where the jail-cell moments of our lives threaten to unravel our faith. But if we learn anything from this text, let it be that we can be like Jesus and John for each other. If we share our hope, then we can help each other rediscover faith, rediscover God's fingerprints, rediscover Christ. We just have to be willing to tell each other what we see.

When I was a college student in Richmond, Virginia, I began to discern a call to ministry. Like a *true* professional, I wrote a letter to every single Presbyterian church in the zip code, begging someone to hire me. (My job experience at that point included dog walking and babysitting my younger brother, so it was a miracle to even be considered.) Fortunately, a small Presbyterian church in town with a warm and friendly congregation made me an offer.

At the time I was onboarded, the church did not have a youth group, so I asked my new boss if I could start one. With his blessing, I began gathering together the teenagers that were there each Sunday. It wasn't long after I arrived that one of those students, we'll call her Kate, ended up in the hospital due to a failed suicide attempt.

There in the hospital, just a few days after I'd arrived, Kate confessed to her mom that she had been enduring abuse, unbeknownst to their family. Kate ended up

in a treatment program, a therapy center that could help her unpack her trauma and heal. During that time the church formed a small care team that wrote letters to Kate. It included people like Kate's confirmation mentor, her childhood Sunday school teacher, and Mr. Franklin, who sat in the pew behind Kate's family her whole life. That small care team took turns writing Kate a letter every single week that she was in treatment.

After Kate was discharged she shared with me that there were days and weeks at the beginning of her treatment where she was convinced that she would never feel good again. There were days and weeks where she was convinced that the scars would be the first thing that she saw, that the trauma would always be on the front of her mind.

But the church kept writing letters. They told her, you are not alone, and we are not giving up on you. They told her what they could see. And although I didn't read them all, I imagine that their letters sounded a lot like Jesus's message to John, because those faithful folks believed in a world where the sick could be healed. They believe in a world where the poor could receive good news, and even the dead come back to life. Kate couldn't see it then. Her jail cell bars were too thick. But the church could see that promised day, so they wrote her letters. They told her what they saw.

And now, dozens of letters and many years later, Kate can finally see some of that for herself. She has a dog, a niece, a group of friends, and a college degree. Kate has a joy that she didn't know then. And I know from talking with her, that when everything good in her life felt out of reach, it was the church, telling her all the places that they saw God's fingerprints, that got her through.

There are things in life that can threaten to erode our faith—gun violence, abuse, jail-cell bars—the list goes on! So if the circumstances of life begin to erode your faith, if the mountains seem impassible, and hope feels out of reach, then let us, your church, tell you what we see. Let us tell you about a girl named Kate who came back to life. Let us tell you about a train that rides through the Alps. Let us tell you about the glimpses of good and the fingerprints of God that we see in our own lives. Just like Jesus did for John, let us tell you about a God who gives good news to the poor and sight to the blind.

John asked, "Is it you, or should we wait for another?" He's not the only one asking. So Church, tell each other what you see. Tell the world what you see, and speak loudly, because we cannot rediscover Jesus alone. Amen.

Notes

¹ Wolmar, C. (n.d.). *The Iron Road: The Illustrated History of Railway - erenow*. The Spread of the Railroads. <https://erenow.net/common/illustrated-history-of-railway/19.php>

² Wikimedia Foundation. (2023, February 13). *Semmering railway*. Semmering Railway. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semmering_railway