

## **“Hope That Trembles”**

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Texts: Matthew 11: 1-11 and Isaiah 43: 19-21

Last week, we talked a lot about King Herod and set the context for the birth of John the Baptizer and later, Jesus. We talked about a reign of fear, persecution, and desperation. Thankfully, we are moving to a whole new text...leaving Luke for Matthew and leaving the infant narratives behind. That is all good news, until you realize that even though our Herod of last week is not in power, “the fearfulness of ‘the time of Herod’ persists.” In other words, all we have is a different Herod. Same genetic makeup and the same type of regime. They are literally called the Herodian regime, and they impact Jesus and John all over the place. Today, we find John in prison. He will not survive. He will soon be executed. That won’t change. Here’s what does happen: John persists in hope facing the worst fear that most can face, the fear of his own death. He has hope. Clearly, though, it is a hope that trembles.

From his jail cell, John wants to know if Jesus is for real. He asks directly, “Are you the one to come, or should we look for another?” And how does Jesus respond?

Not with chastisement.

Not with a lecture.

He doesn’t say John should know better.

Instead, Jesus answers indirectly—with the witness of what is unfolding. In the words of Matthew, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news

brought to them (Matthew 11: 4-5).” Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee reminds us, “Jesus points not to a grand victory, but to the quiet signs of transformation. He doesn’t hand John certainty—but invites him to perceive God at work. It is a reorientation toward Isaiah’s vision: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19a).”

We have been talking about this for several weeks now. The problem in our lives is that often we cannot, or will not, see what is transforming before our eyes. We look to the big military parades, the election victories, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or some other measure to decide whether or not God is at work. We’re often looking at the wrong things entirely, or even if we are trying to look at what is transforming, our vision is still clouded. We’re looking for the big change, the big bang – if you will – and that isn’t really how the Bible tells us that God works.

You see when John asks his question Jesus, “The empire is still intact. Herod still reigns. John will not be released from prison. Yet Jesus insists: God’s dream is unfolding. Look again. Listen. Perceive.” Those words resonate today. Jesus insists: God’s dream is unfolding. Look again. Listen. Perceive. Yet we will still struggle to see. There is truly so much wrong with the world, and in our own lives, to such an extent that it is hard to see the hand of God at work.

Dr. Lee reminds us that “Hope in the gospel is not grounded in outcomes or visible success. Hope is rooted in perception—in trusting that God is still at work, even when systems remain unchanged, even when prophets die behind bars. John’s question echoes across the generations. Activists, caregivers, clergy, organizers, artists—anyone who has

dared to hope in a better world—knows this moment. The fear that nothing has changed. The grief that our lives might not have mattered. The silence from the people or institutions we hoped would transform.”

In her book *Hope: A User's Manual*, author MaryAnn McKibben Dana writes:

In my work coaching leaders, I've noticed a couple themes that often emerge simultaneously. First, many people are perpetually flirting with burnout—too much to do, high levels of turmoil, not enough clarity, paltry self-care. At the same time, many people (often the same ones as above) feel they aren't doing enough, usually because they're grading themselves on a curve of what they see from others, which is always distorted. And we're not even grading ourselves against particular individuals: we take every snippet from social media and elsewhere and amalgamate them into a single superhero who is doing everything right. A perfectly productive person who somehow has plenty of time for meditative mornings sipping coffee. An effortless parent who's also crushing it at work, tending a prolific garden, volunteering at the food pantry, managing a sparkling home, and pursuing a burgeoning side hustle on Etsy. We are judging ourselves against a construct, a composite. (p49)

We do this with biblical characters as well. We skip over or ignore the parts of their lives that were a struggle. Think of John the Baptizer. We see him as baptizing so many people, even Jesus himself. We see him as confident in himself, even though he's a bit odd. We see him strongly. We see him full of hope, confidence and mistake-free. And then we come to this story, and we see John face-to-face with death, the end of his ministry, and his own questioning about whether or not he's enough, and whether Jesus is the person everyone has been waiting for. He questions. He wonders. He worries. He trembles. Maybe he even sees himself as a failure.

Ever felt that way? Me, too. Burnout, loss of hope, fear of the future, feelings of unworthiness, unfaithfulness, or another “negative” emotion creep into all of our worlds. That is true whether the world sees it or not. I'm sure there is someone out there who would

argue that John never doubted, never was afraid, and never trembled. That's because we seem to believe that anyone with doubt or fear is somehow misled, weak, or otherwise a disappointment.

“But Jesus doesn't see John's crumbling hope as failure. He names it as part of what makes John faithful.” Hear these words of Dr. Lee, “hope that trembles is still hope. Even in doubt, John is still a prophet. Even in fear, he is beloved. Advent does not require us to manufacture hope. It invites us to bring our emptied hope to Jesus, to ask the hard questions, and to listen again for signs of God's nearness. When we're running out of hope, it may be the perfect time to ask: What do you see? What do you hear?”

And it's okay that sometimes all you see and hear are signs that hope has been dashed against a stone. At the same time, I would like to ask you where you get your information. Where are you spending your time? Do you spend much of the day on your phone, your tv, or tablet seeing the latest horrible thing that has happened? To catch the news of the day is okay, but wallowing in it makes it harder and harder to have hope. The news doesn't often capture what is good in the world. Instead, you'll often find the good in your community, your friend group – even your church! 😊 The task is to trust that “somewhere, even now, something new is springing forth.”

I imagine that the hardest thing Jesus and John encountered was the disbelief of those around them. No matter what they said or did, people dismissed them with, “it's too good to be true.” I told you last week that if Jesus walked down the aisle of this church, there's a good chance I would not recognize him. All my preconceived notions of who he is,

what he would say, and how he would act get in the way of actually seeing him if were to stand right here. The good news is MaryAnn Dana's reminder that "hope is rigid and false without grace."

The point here is that hope is not some big, flashy, look-at-me operation. Hope is much more often manifest in the small actions that occur in small groups, small actions, and the like. Some of them may seem barely noticeable.

Dana puts it this way, "It's a paradox—each small task we do, whether it's familial or societal, does not remake the world. It makes the present moment better, which is no small thing. But hope infuses those modest acts with meaning, not just to alleviate present suffering, but with the audacious goal to construct a new world." If you look at the Jesus movement, and John's before him, it was a relatively small group of people in a backwater part of the Roman empire who gathered around a couple of men who had hope, but truly hope that trembled at times. But every task they undertook was for something greater than themselves, and beyond themselves. They saw a reign—a kingdom—that was radically different from the one of the Herodians. They knew frontal assault wouldn't work, so they worked on the margins—the edge of the inside—to change both church and state. Perfect it never was, and never is, but hope doesn't reside in the perfect. Hope resides in the people doing each small task with the goal in mind of something far greater than ourselves or any human construction.

Rubem Alves authored a poem that I'd like to share with you this morning, that I think makes the point better than I've said here so far. It is called, "Tomorrow's Children."

*What is hope?*

*It is a presentiment that imagination is more real  
and reality less real than it looks.*

*It is a hunch that the overwhelming brutality of facts  
that oppress and repress is not the last word.*

*It is a suspicion  
that reality is more complex  
than realism wants us to believe  
and that the frontiers of the possible  
are not determined by the limits of the actual  
and that in a miraculous and unexpected way  
life is preparing the creative events  
which will open the way to freedom and resurrection...*

*The two, suffering and hope, live from each other.*

*Suffering without hope  
produces resentment and despair,  
hope without suffering  
creates illusions, naivete, and drunkenness...*

*Let us plant dates*

*Even though those who plant them will never eat them.*

*We must live by the love of what we will never see.*

*That is the secret discipline.*

*It is a refusal to let the creative act  
be dissolved in immediate sense experience  
and a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren.*

*Such disciplined love  
is what has given prophets, revolutionaries and saints  
the courage to die for the future they envisaged.*

*They make their own bodies*

*the seed of their highest hope.*

Source: "Tomorrow's Children" from *Hijos de Maoana*, by Rubem Alves. Salamanca, Spain: Ediciones Sigueme, 1976.