

Sermon 14 December 2025

James 1:2-8 Matthew 11:2-11

John the Baptist has been imprisoned. He hears what Jesus has been doing and he sends a few of his followers to ask Jesus if he really is the Messiah or should they be waiting for someone else. *‘So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the Messiah we’ve been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?”’* Matthew 11:3. I find this to be extremely interesting. After all, it wasn’t so long ago that John was preparing everyone for the coming of the Messiah and then when Jesus appears to John on the banks of the Jordan River, John hails him as the Messiah. I quote from John 1:29, *‘The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is the one I was talking about.”’*

But it now looks as though John is having his doubts, he is not too sure. He wants confirmation. How human is that. I am sure we can all relate to John’s momentary lapse of faith, because that is essentially what it is. How often, when the dice are not rolling our way, when the going becomes particularly arduous, do we question God, or heaven forbid (excuse the pun), even doubt God? How often when someone is dealing with adversity, or knows someone close to them that is, have I heard the question, Where is God? If God really exists, why does he allow this to happen? It is an understandable question. It is a very human question.

Look, it’s quite ok, when life appears to be throwing us a few curve balls, and things just don’t seem to be fair, it’s ok to either get a little angry with God, or to question the way God is handling our challenges. After all, what did Jesus himself cry out on the cross? *‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’* Now if Jesus can utter such a cry, I think it is ok for me, and in fact, for us all, to utter such a cry. It is a cry, a plea that I am sure everyone of us has voiced, on probably more than one occasion.

In the end, Jesus knew exactly where he was going and that he was in God’s hands. Similarly, we also, no matter how dire the circumstances might be, need to have that faith that God is there for us and God will come through for us. But gosh, it can be hard at times.

I am sure you have heard the story about the young man who slipped and fell off a cliff while hiking. Luckily, he was able to grab a branch on his way down. Holding on for dear life, he looked down only to see nothing but rocks below him. He looked up to the edge of the cliff from where he has fallen. Panicked, he yelled, *‘Help! Help! Is there anyone there? Help!’*

A booming voice spoke up (it could only be God!), *‘I am here, and I will save you if you believe in me.’* *‘I believe! I believe!’* shouted back the man. *‘If you really believe me, then let go of the branch and I will save you.’* The young man looked down, and seeing the rocks below, quickly looked back up and shouted, *‘Is there anyone else there?’*

I have a degree of sympathy for the young man, and I have to ask myself, *‘Would I have the faith to let go of the branch?’* My friends, we need to let go of that branch and place ourselves completely in God’s hands. It is not always that easy, but as the psalmist says in Psalm 118:5, *‘In my distress I prayed to the Lord, and the Lord answered me and rescued me.’* We need to imprint that verse on our brain. Every one of us experience distress of varying degrees. At those times, that verse should be our rallying cry.

We also need to take heart from the words of James in our first reading: *‘God blesses those who endure testing.’* James 1:12. Another verse to imprint on our brain.

I want to just make a point in light of this question we often have when life is challenging us in what appears to be an unfair manner, the question being, *‘Where is God in all of this? Is God just standing by and allowing these unfair things to eventuate?’* Well, one of the answers to that question, is that God sends us people. In the end, that is how God works – through people. Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote the best-selling book, *‘Why do bad things happen to good people?’* wrote this: *‘Human beings are God’s language. When you have been hurt by life and you cry out to God, how does God respond? God responds by sending people. God comes to you in the incarnation of loving, caring neighbours and friends, friends who will come and do whatever they can to ease your pain. We need people. We need to know that we are cared for.’*

There is the story of the little boy whose mother sent him on an errand and it took him a long time to come home. When he finally got back, his mother said, 'Where were you? I was worried about you.' The boy said, 'There was a child down the street who was crying because his bicycle was broken and I felt so bad I stopped to help him.' The mother says, 'But you don't do anything about fixing bicycles.' The boy replies, 'Of course not. I stopped and I helped him cry.'

God works through people, and we are called to be his workers, his disciples, spreading love and kindness throughout his world. I think that lies at the heart of the Christmas story. God is good, and if we can put our trust and faith in him, we can see and experience that goodness. In the end, faith gives us hope, and without hope, we have nothing.

Let me finish by reminding you of the story of the 12-year-old African girl who lived in a village that was experiencing a severe drought. There had been no rain for months and the crops were drying up. The village elders decided to hold a prayer meeting to pray for rain, so one hot afternoon the villagers assembled in the town hall. The meeting was just about to get under way when this little girl walks in. She makes her way right up to the front to take a seat. Outside, there was not a cloud in the sky, and the little girl was carrying an umbrella!

That, my friends, is faith and hope. The theme for our first Sunday of Advent was hope. There is no doubt that Christ brings hope, but we have to play our part and believe. On Advent Sunday we lit the candle of hope. Faith and hope are inextricably entwined.

Let me finish with a benediction from Romans 15:13: *'So I pray that God, who gives you hope, will keep you happy and full of peace as you believe in him. May you overflow with hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.'*