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“Great, Greater, and Greatest”

Text: Matthew 11:2-15

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Unless you have been living under a rock, you have heard the news that Nelson Mandela died. His funeral was earlier this morning and coverage of all the events remembering him has been all over the news. He is being remembered and celebrated for all that he did to advance the cause of human rights and equality. He had spent some 18 years as a political prisoner in an awful prison for speaking out. And when he was eventually released, he went on to do a number of significant things. He died at home after 95 years of life, surrounded by family. And this week, presidents and other dignitaries cancelled events, changed their schedules, and flew half-way around the world to be at his memorial. He is, we are being told, one of the greatest, if not the greatest man of our times.

But today we heard of someone even greater. Jesus said: ***among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.*** John the Baptist was a political prisoner too, having been thrown into King Herod’s dungeon for his message. John the Baptist was also all about equality, for he told all people - no matter who they were or what their place in life: *Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* No favoritism for John! All are sinners and in need of repentance and forgiveness.

But *unlike* Nelson Mandela, John was never released; he was beheaded by Herod in prison. He didn’t get to die a peaceful death, surrounded by family; his life and career were cut short. And he didn’t have any dignitaries at his funeral - just a few of his disciples who came and took his headless body and buried it. Somewhere. We don’t even know where. No memorial. No honor. And *this one*, Jesus said, is the greatest.

Now, you’d get an argument about that from many people today, and I’ll bet it was not an uncontroversial statement when Jesus said it either. For think about that for a moment; think about all men who had been born up to that point. There were the men we know about from the Bible: men like Noah, Abraham, Joseph, David, and Solomon, just to name a few. There were also the great men of political fame, who had built great kingdoms and advanced science and culture. *And John surpasses all these?* John, who eats locusts and wild honey? John, who lives out in the desert? John, who wears a coat of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist? John, the eccentric prophet who makes you uncomfortable to be around, yet who you can’t help but go out to see?

And then what about all the people, all the men and women who have been born and

done great things in the two thousand years since John? Would Jesus say the same thing about John today, that he is the greatest? Well, if John surpassed all those others, then yes, he is greater than these too. ***Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.***

So listen to him today, to this great one. He sends his disciples to Jesus with a question. ***Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*** It was not a question just for himself, but for them, and for you today, and for all people of all time. All are included in that “we.” Is Jesus the one? The one for you in the darkness of depression. The one for you in the sadness of death. The one for you in the pain of sickness and disease. The one for you in the isolation of loneliness. The one for you under the burdens of life. The one for you locked in struggles of worry and doubt. The one for you when life takes a turn you didn’t expect and your world come crumbling down. ***Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?***

John asks so the world may know. The one who came to prepare the way for the Messiah and point to Him is pointing to Him still, even from prison, even still today from the grave. That we may know that Jesus is the coming one, the promised one, the one who will save us from our sins, our sinful world, and our sin-caused death.

And so Jesus answers that question by pointing to the signs of all that. Jesus is fulfilling what the prophet Isaiah had spoken, and that is important. Jesus is the subject and the fulfillment of all the Scriptures. But what these signs show **is sin coming undone** before the one who has come to cut the knot of sin. All who tried before Him just made the knot tighter and tighter. But with Jesus, what sin has caused is coming undone. The blind, the lame, the deaf, the lepers, the dead - all is cured, cleansed, and raised to life again. Signs of an even greater deliverance coming through Jesus’ death and resurrection. When Jesus would have our noose of sin tied around Him on the cross and snuff out His life, so that in His resurrection that knot be cut for us once and for all.

But in that list of things Jesus has come to do something about, where are you? As I look around today, none of you is blind, lame, deaf, leperous, or dead, though many of you wear glasses, have hearing aides, and some have trouble walking. But here you are: ***the poor have good news preached to them.*** You may not be poor by worldly standards, but you were by the heavenly one. The only standard that really matters, in fact. For just as many today would argue about the greatness of John, so many today would argue about our spiritual poverty. Clearly, God measures things differently than we do. For born in sin, you are born poor, with no eternal inheritance, no eternal life, nothing that will last beyond the few years and few things you are given in this life. And when you add to that your sin, you not only have nothing, you increase a debt you cannot pay, with the only thing waiting for you the debtors prison of hell.

But you, you have the good news preached to you! That this is not your inevitable

destiny, but there is more, there is hope, there is life for you. And not just a life eternal, but a new life that starts even now. A new life just as real as if you had been blind and could now see, if you had been deaf and could now hear, if you had been lame and could now walk, if you had been a leper and were now cleansed, and if you had been dead and were now alive. For all that is what happens to you here, when the coming one comes to you in the water of His Baptism, in the words of His Gospel, and in His Body and Blood. He comes to you that you now **see** His glory that is hidden here in these gifts. He comes to you that you now **hear** His words of peace. He comes to you that you now **be cleansed** of your sins. He comes to you that you now be **raised** to a new life. A new life not limited by the events and changes of this world, but which surpasses them. That *wherever* you are and *however* you are, you have hope.

That is the new life John is pointing to and Jesus is providing. New life through the Word of God. For, Jesus goes on to ask the people, *what did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?* Or in other words, did you go out to see all the nice scenery and the soft wind blowing through the rushes on the banks of the Jordan? No! *What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?* Or in other words, a successful man dressed in a designer suit, with the finest Italian leather shoes, and perfect hair? No! You don't dress like that out in the wilderness. *What then did you go out to see? A prophet.* Yes. Someone who speaks the Word of God. To hear the Word of God. The Word of God that gives new life.

So too for you today: *what did you come to church to see?* An impressive building, beautiful music, a successful man? No! None of those things are here. You came still today to hear the Word of God. The Word that is truth. The Word that still points to Jesus as the coming one, as the answer to our questions, and the life for our death. You have come to receive what you did not have, and what you need. For you have been told what here you hear and see: the sinful are forgiven, the hungry are fed, and *the poor have the good news preached to them.* And *blessed are you who are not offended by Him*, by His Law, by His seeming weakness, but who repent and are blessed by Him, receiving from Him gifts that the world judges weak and useless, but which give a treasure that will never pass away. A treasure that gives life.

So while you may never be a Nelson Mandela, God will use you to do great things - things that are great in His sight, though things that are maybe despised by the world. But no worries: *the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater* than all the great ones of this world. *And that's you.* For in Christ, you are in the kingdom the heaven. The world strives for greatness by achievement, or even by force and violence, Jesus says - force and violence that may one day come upon you. If it does, do not worry. Christ took that force and violence on the cross and broke it, making it a means not to break you down but raise you up to life. To make you great.

So John's question is a good one for us to hear, especially now, in these last days before

Christmas, and in these last days *period*. That we rejoice in His **first** coming - His birth - rightly, that we look for His **second** coming - in glory - rightly, and that we know and receive His coming now - here! - rightly. For Jesus really is the coming one. For He is always coming, and working, *for you*.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.