

Lord, prepare our hearts to receive You in fullness and in power, we pray. *Amen.*

*I'm just a poor way-farin' stranger, traveling through this world below.  
There is no sorrow, toil or danger in that bright world to which I go.  
I'm goin' there to see my Father; I'm goin' there no more to roam;  
I'm just a-goin' over Jordan; I'm just a-goin' over home.*

That song may not be about John the Baptist, but it's become associated with him. We can just hear him singing it, later in his life, in that dungeon of Herod's, far away from Galilee and Judea, far away from the wilderness and freedom. *I know dark clouds will gather o'er me; I know my pathway's rough and steep; But golden fields lie out before me, where weary eyes no more shall weep.*

John the Baptist needed some good news.

John was a truth-teller who had told the truth to the wrong person, telling King Herod he was morally out of line marrying his brother's wife.

That got John thrown into Herod's dungeon, "over Jordan."

Historians think he was held in one of Herod's fort-cities, way east of the Dead Sea, far from Judea and Galilee.

He had seen the beginning of Jesus' public ministry – he had baptized Jesus.

He couldn't have been more sure that he had in fact met "the Lamb of God."

He was sure as he can be... yet given enough time in a dank, dark dungeon, cut off from the light, even John doubted. But he was hearing stories.

Matthew tells us that when word about Jesus, his preaching and his miracles began to spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country,

John's disciples reported all of it to John in prison.

He sends two of his disciples back to find Jesus and ask him,

*"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"*

That, to me, is one of the most poignant statements in the entire New Testament.

This, from the man who said so confidently when he saw Jesus approaching him,

*"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*

who said with such humility, *"The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears, rejoices at the bridegroom's voice. ..., my joy has been fulfilled."*

Now, cut off from the bridegroom's voice, unable to see for himself the signs of God's Kingdom, John is torn by doubts. But he doesn't give up.

He sends friends to ask for him, *Are you the one?*

And what does Jesus say in reply? *“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive their sight; the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.”* Everything that had been prophesied about the in-breaking Kingdom of God, here were signs in abundance.

John could not see them himself, but he could hear about them from witnesses.

He heard stories. If people don't hear our God stories, they won't know to ask. If we don't talk about faith and spirit, we won't ask our friends in times of doubt. Doubt is an integral part of a living faith. Faith means believing in what you cannot yet see. When it gets dark for us, we can call on our stories; or we can ask each other, “Is Jesus for real? Where did you last see him?” We have to report to each other, because signs of God activity are all around us. Healings are still happening, even in Charles County, even in our churches. People are connecting to God and each other. We're working for justice. We may not be raising the dead – yet – but we are offering good news to the poor.

Friday night I attended the Christmas party given at the Department of Social Services for the foster youth in Charles County.

We had been asked to provide gifts for the youth in the Group Home who are not from the County. We've gotten to know some of these kids, superficially at least, and they've been through a lot. They're pretty tough. I watched as they each went up to Santa and got their packages and gift bags; I watched as they opened their Amazon boxes with somewhat wary looks on their faces – and then the surprise and smiles as they said, “Oh, I got what I asked for!” and “Oh, there's more in the bag.”

They don't know who those gifts came from; but for a moment in their painful young lives they encountered love in the form of a gift. We did that. Jesus did that through us. *“Go and tell John what you've seen and heard.”*

There are a whole lot of people we know out there who may have heard of Jesus, or they may vaguely know that some people believe in God; and they're locked up in all kinds of prisons – of anxiety, of illness, of addiction, of having too much, of having too little, of wondering what purpose they have. They need to hear this story, of a God who loves so much he sacrificed all to give us access to him in perfect freedom and forgiveness. The story of a Son who went the distance into our circumstances to set us free.

Some of the people we know need this story, and our story. They're asking, "Hey, is this true? Is this Jesus for real? Is this God for real?"

And they need to hear our stories about the last place we saw him, or heard him call us; of the reason we hope; of the healings we see.

Where we have experienced forgiveness and joy and hope, to open up those conversations and be present with those in pain.

Go and tell, of healing, of hope, of love beyond measure.

*Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God."*

We need to speak of what we have seen. We have to learn to speak of God.

How do we get good at that? By watching for Christ. All the time.

Tuning our spiritual antennae to pick up the frequency of God-Life.

Turning ourselves toward God, noticing every time we see evidence of love.

God is love; every time we see evidence of love, Jesus is somewhere around.

We can get as good at watching for Christ as we are at watching for danger.

There is nothing that faces us that is bigger or stronger than God.

There is power in this Kingdom into which we have been invited – the Greek word used for miracles is "*dunamis*," from which we take our word "dynamite."

There is unbelievable, explosive power at our fingertips as the people of God – and we don't have to be afraid of it!

We just need to exercise it in Jesus' name – and to remind each other about it.

Each time we exercise one of our gifts in the name of Jesus –

whether in church, or in out in the world – we reveal Jesus. We show him.

Jesus said that as great as John the Baptist was, the least in God's kingdom would be even greater. That is our promise – to do even greater things than John.

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.*

We are those waters, my friends – we are those streams.

Break forth and bring life into the desert.

*Amen.*

**Matthew 11:2-11**

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive theirsight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

**Isaiah 35:1-10**

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.