

Sermon Notes – December 11, 2022
The Holy Gospel of St. Matthew 11: 2-11
Peace Lutheran Church
“The Desert Shall Rejoice and Blossom”

John the forerunner is again a major character in this Sunday's gospel. Now it is clear that, whatever the general expectations of a messiah were in the first century, Jesus does not fit John's criterion of a fiery destroyer of sin. Like us, John is distressed that Jesus is not the Messiah he expected or would have chosen. Jesus doubles down on His ministry, not only lifting His deeds of healing but also making the proclamation of good news to the poor (compare with Matt. 5: 3), rather than miracles, the climax of his claims. He blesses those who don't stumble over the nature of His ministry; the next section of the gospel tells of many different people who were or would be scandalized by Him. John is not rejected; he is to be preferred to contemporary celebrities (Herod Antipas' court was well dressed, and his coins included images of rushes). But the last verse of our reading seems to indicate that a new age has begun with Jesus' ministry, in which John's preaching, essential as it is, is transcended and completed. When John said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt. 3: 2), he meant that our entry into that kingdom was dependent upon our conversion. When Jesus says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (4: 17), He means that our participation in that kingdom involves a change of heart and life.

The first reading, like the one last week, presents the return from exile as a day of the Lord. That day is presented in Isaiah as one of healing, not only of humans but of nature itself. The way home is made easy and safe. Here we have one of the interesting paradoxes of Advent: while the focus is on the coming of the Lord, many of the quintessential Advent passages talk about the coming of the exiles. Here, as always, it is God's action that allows the return-and the holy

way is the road built by the Holy One, for the holy ones, emphasizing the connection between God and His people. James seems to be written to a community that is tired of waiting (were they to have started to sing Christmas carols in Advent...maybe we can't wait either) and distressed that the promises of God are so long in being fulfilled. James reminds us that we are not God; it is God who determines when rain will fall and when promises will be realized. Advent reminds us that active waiting is the form that hope takes in the meantime.