

DUNGEON DAYS
Luke 7:18-29

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His clothes were made of animal skins. As one author put it, his walls were the mountains and his ceiling, the stars.

You remember John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus. His very birth was a miracle. His mother, Elizabeth, was barren and old. The angel of the Lord appeared to her husband, Zacharias, and told him, “Don’t be afraid. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you are going to name him John. He’s going to be a special boy,” said the angel. “He’s going to be the forerunner of the Messiah. He’ll have the spirit and the power of the prophet Elijah.” That’s what Gabriel said.

Old Zacharias didn’t believe it. The angel made him unable to speak until the day John was born because he didn’t believe the words of the angel of the Lord. When the baby was born, Zacharias asked for a tablet – he couldn’t speak – and he wrote, “Call him John.” And at once his tongue was loosened and he could speak again. The first thing he did was praise God.

But it was John the Baptist’s tongue that was all the more important. With his tongue he preached the message of repentance. He preached, says Luke in Luke 3:2, the word of God. He preached in the wilderness. He came around the River Jordan. He preached that people ought to repent, that they could be forgiven of their sins. He preached a baptism of repentance. He preached a hard word to ancient Israel. “Don’t claim to be descendants of Abraham. That won’t do you any good. Why, God could take these stones and raise up children to Abraham. The ax is already laid at the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” He told them to repent of their sins.

His preaching was so powerful, so poignant, that some asked, “Is he the Christ? Is he the Messiah?” John said, “Oh, no. I baptize you with water, but you just wait. One is coming who is mightier than I am. I am not even worthy to unlace His shoestrings. And He will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit.”

John was busy baptizing one day, and Jesus approached him. John made the proclamation, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. I shouldn’t be baptizing you. You should be baptizing me.” It seemed in those days like John had all the faith in the world. He knew Jesus was the Son of God, the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

Luke doesn’t make it as clear as Matthew does, but in Matthew 11 Matthew says, “John the Baptist is in prison.” He had courage, way too much courage. King Herod had given in to the enticements of his own brother’s wife, Herodius. He decided to trade his wife in for his sister-in-law. While the tattling tongues of the gossips were delighted, John was infuriated. He denounced the marriage

for what it was – adultery (John 3:19). As a result, Herod locked John up in prison. Now John, once the preacher of light, was down in the darkness of the dungeon.

Herodius was infuriated with what John had said about her and her relationship to her new husband. But Herod was afraid – he had heard about the power of John the Baptist. He knew he was a righteous man, a holy man, even if he did have a severe tongue. In fact, he even liked listening to John (Mark 6:20). He was intrigued by this wilderness wild man, this powerful preacher.

It was at a birthday party that things went wrong. My, was it a birthday party! It was the king's birthday party – it was Herod's birthday party. Herodius had her daughter come in and dance. She danced for Herod and all the guests. The king said, "Man, that girl is something else. I'll give you anything you want. Doesn't matter. I'll give you half the kingdom for a dance like that." Men get carried away sometimes – they are willing to give up a lot when they watch the seductive swaying of a woman's body. Her mama told her what to ask for. "Ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter." She could now silence his wagging tongue forever.

The king was sorry, sorry he'd made an oath. He'd sworn in front of his dinner guests. So he had to do it. They brought back his head and gave it to the girl. And the girl gave John's head to her mother.

This story is a hard one to stomach because John dies because Herod lusts. A man of God is killed while a man of passion is winking at his niece.

Where is God when His faithful are down in the dungeon?

It doesn't make any sense to me, and it doesn't make any sense to John, either. Before Herod made the oath, John paces back and forth in prison, trying to figure out why on earth he, who had been given the word of God, was now given the dampness of the dungeon.

In our text today, Luke 7, he sends a delegation of disciples to ask the question. Look at Luke 7:19. "Are you the expected one? Or do we look for somebody else?"

It was a fair question. There comes a time in each of our lives when we too are down in the dungeon and we ask the question of John. When everything is going well and wonderful in our lives, it's easy to trust God, to believe in Him, to praise Him. But what happens when you find yourself, like John, for no reason of your own, down in the dungeon.

What took you to the dungeon?

Was it a phone call? "We have your daughter at the station. You'd better come down."

Was it a letter on the kitchen table? "I've left. Don't try to reach me. Don't try to call me. It's over. I just don't love you anymore."

Was it a diagnosis from the doctor? "I'm afraid our news is not very good."

Was it a telegram one day? “We regret to inform you that your son is missing in action.”

When the news comes, God is suddenly not so easy to see. The view that had been so crisp has changed. You turn to see God, but His figure is distorted. It’s hard to see Him through the pain, the pain of your heart. It’s hard to see Him when you’re down in the dungeon.

“How can God allow this to happen?” asked John. And you ask the same thing.

We all seem to have an agenda for God. If God is God, then we give Him a divine job description. If God is God, then...there will be no financial hardship in my family...my children will never be buried before I am...people will treat me fairly...the dream of my life will be answered.

These expectations we have of God, whether we write them down and notarize them or not. And when pain comes, when we’re disappointed, we look for God and can’t find Him because we, too, are down in the dungeon. (Max Lucado, *In The Eye of The Storm*, p. 105-106, paraphrased)

Are you really the Messiah, or should we be looking for someone else?

Are you really the Christ, or should we look for another?

Congregation, you may be wandering in the dungeon right now. And you are pondering, “Is Jesus really Jesus? If so, why do I find myself in the stench of jail? In the midst of suffering? In the throes of divorce?”

A Mississippi preacher in Jan Karon’s *At Home in Mitford* novel says, “Everybody is trying to swallow something that won’t go down.” We all experience something in our lives that is just too big to swallow, just too painful to accept.

If you’re not experiencing the dampness of the dungeon today, your dungeon may be here tomorrow. And when you can’t swallow it, you ask, “Jesus, if you’re really Jesus, then why? Why the pain? Why the suffering? Why the sorrow? Why the death? Why the divorce? Why the unemployment? Why? Why? Why? Why?”

All of God’s people have trials. The trial for Jonah was gurgling around in the belly of a fish. The trial for Noah was building an ark amid sneers and jeers. The trial for Jacob was wrestling with an angel.

God breathed on Isaiah – and he stripped off his clothes and walked around the town naked and barefoot for three years. God breathed on Ruth – and she was widowed and departed from her familiar native Moab to the unknown land of Judah. God breathed on Paul – and he changed his plans after having a vision of a man from Macedonia. And God breathed on you – and you....

Jesus didn't say, Come and follow me, and I will make you feel good. He didn't say, "Come and follow me, and I will make you rich or I'll make you successful." He said, "Come and follow me, and take up your cross." (Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsumani*, p. 98-99)

So we pace back and forth with John the Baptist in our own dungeon and we ask, "Are you really the Christ or should we be looking for another?"

I want us to learn some things from this passage.

I. We cannot redefine what it means for Jesus to be Jesus based on our own wishes.

Jesus creates us. We do not create Him.

John has his doubts. Notice in Luke 7:19 – "Summoning two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord." Luke doesn't have any doubts. He calls Jesus "Lord." It's John who has the doubts in this story. Luke tips his hand.

For Jesus to be Lord means....

All of us finish that sentence in our own way. If Jesus is Lord, then my business won't fail. If Jesus is Lord, then the biopsy will be clear. If Jesus is Lord, my womb will not be barren. And when He doesn't live up to our expectations, our own definition of what the Messiah ought to be, we ask the question, "Are you really the Messiah?" And then we begin looking for someone else.

II. The dungeon causes doubts.

If God is good, if God is powerful, then why do His people suffer?

I don't know your pain this morning. You know your pain. I don't know what causes you to look to the Holy One of Israel and ask the question of John, "Do I need to start looking for somebody else to save me?" I don't know what you're trying to swallow that is just a little bit too big. But I know among a people as great as this there is suffering – much told and much more untold. I'm sorry for your suffering this morning, because when we're down in the dungeon, we doubt, and our vision of God is unclear.

III. Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is Messiah, based on His own terms.

Turn to Luke 4:18. Jesus preaches His programmatic sermon, His first sermon in Luke's gospel. He's in the synagogue in Nazareth and He says, reading from Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord...Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Notice what the Messiah was going to do.

Turn to Luke 7:22. Jesus tells the disciples, “You go tell John what is going on. The blind receive sight. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised up. And the poor have the gospel preached to them.”

He has fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah. He has done Messiah-like things. Those who had dark eyes now have eyes that let in light. Those who could not walk – the lame – now they leap. The lepers are spotless. And the ears of the deaf are flooded with sounds. And even the dead are being raised, and the poor have received the good news.

Jesus is doing the things of the Messiah. You don’t have to look anywhere else. The words of the prophet are being fulfilled.

Oh, not everyone is healed. And not all the dead are raised. But in God’s time and in God’s way, those selected in His sovereignty experience the healing of the Lord.

IV. Jesus does not rebuke John for his doubt, his dungeon experience.

In fact, as the messengers leave, He turns to praise John. In Luke 7:26, Jesus says John is more than a prophet. In fact, in verse 28 He says, “Of all those born of women, there is no one greater than John.”

Jesus knows your suffering. He is not surprised by your doubt. Turn and trust Him and know that He is God, whether He meets your expectations. When life is easy, when there is no struggle in our life, we get sloppy about our costly discipleship. We don’t develop in the faith until tough times come along.

One expert has noticed that about those who live in high risk areas, like the coastline of Florida. Dr. Robert Simpson, former director of the National Hurricane Center in Miami, said, “It’s a very dangerous thing to go so long between hurricanes. It causes a larger number of incredulous people – nonbelievers [in the damage hurricanes can do]. As a result, people start building in dangerous places and fail to take precautions when storms are coming. (*Homiletics*, Nov/Dec 2001)

We live in absolute ignorance until we face the darkness, the dampness of the dungeon.

Ronald Prince, once pastor of the First Baptist Church of Cleburne, remembers that it was a Wednesday afternoon – a day when preachers are trying to study and secretaries are demanding a text and a title for Sunday’s sermon for the bulletin. The Spirit of God can move when and where He wishes, as long as He meets the secretary’s deadline so she can get it properly typed for Sunday’s bulletin. And Wednesday in those days – and Wednesday in these days at First Baptist, Amarillo – is that publishing deadline.

He handed in his text and title that Wednesday and continued to study. The secretary knocked on his door. It was one of those times when she wasn’t supposed to disturb his study unless it was

absolutely urgent. “I really think you should take this call,” she said. “It’s the nurse at the school. She says your daughter, Joy, has a fever.”

They couldn’t find his wife. She had gone to the grocery store. So the preacher, Ronald Prince, got into his car and drove to the school, not too far away from the church, picked up his daughter, swung by home to pick up his wife (hoping she’d be home by now) before they were to make their way to the doctor as advised by the school nurse. It just so happened as he did swing by the house, his wife was coming home from the grocery store. They called the doctor, and the doctor in this small town came to the home of the pastor – the home of Ronald Prince – to examine his daughter, Joy.

The fever had not gone down. It had gone up. It had escalated to 104 by now. The doctor said, “We have a race on our hands,” and they headed straight for the hospital, sixty miles away. In the hospital, as the pastor prayed for Joy, the worst happened. She died – died, it was later discovered, of a viral sleeping sickness.

I can’t imagine having this much courage. I buried all four of my grandparents. But it would be tough to do what Ronald Prince did. He had the courage to conduct the funeral for his daughter. But that’s not the most remarkable thing. The very next Sunday, he had the courage to go to the pulpit, as he always entered the pulpit. He had the courage to preach the sermon that had already been written before his daughter’s death – the sermon he had turned in, text and title, that Wednesday before – a sermon entitled, “Have You Lost Your Joy?”

Jesus is the Messiah, even in the midst of our suffering. No, Jesus is the Messiah *especially* in our suffering. Jesus is Messiah even when we are down in the dungeon, even when we have lost our joy.