

What Do You Fear?

When We're Running Out of Hope, God Is at Work

Second Sunday in Advent

Matthew 11:1-11 Isaiah 43:19-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
December 7, 2025

As I mentioned last Sunday, our Advent resource from A Sanctified Art invites us into a courageous question: **What do you fear?** It's not a rhetorical question. It's an invitation to honesty—an opening to the deep places where our hearts ache, where our energy runs low. But it doesn't leave us in our fear. It urges us to insist on hope even in and through the things that shake us.

This week, our spiritual companion in fear and hope is **John the Baptist**—the fierce prophet who once cried out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way!"—now sitting in prison, facing death. The fiery voice is quieted. The bold prophet is reduced to one aching question: **"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"** John, who spent his whole life preparing the way for Jesus, now wonders if he got it wrong. And who among us hasn't been there? Who hasn't asked, at some point:

*Is all my effort worth it?
Does anything I do matter or make a difference?
Am I even on the right track?*

These are not questions of weak faith. They are questions born of fatigue, heartbreak, and the cost of courage. The Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee, our resource biblical commentator, reminds us that John's question isn't cynicism; it's the cry of someone who has given everything, yet sits in the dark with little to show for it. Many of us know that feeling. When you've marched, protested, voted, volunteered, prayed, worked for healing, spoken the truth, raised children, tended a classroom, cared for aging parents, resisted injustice—and still the world seems unchanged. This is hope when hope is running thin. And Jesus responds with neither shame nor scolding. No, "You should know better." No, "Where is your faith?" No, "Try harder." Instead, Jesus answers with a gentle reframing:

*"Go and tell John what you hear and see..."
The blind see.
The lame walk.
The lepers are cleansed.
The deaf hear.
The dead are raised.
The poor receive good news.*

Jesus doesn't deny the reality of John's imprisonment or the violence of Herod's empire. **He doesn't promise John a happy ending. He simply gives him something to hold on to and points to the places—small, quiet, tender—where God is at work.** "Look again, John. Listen again. Something new is springing forth—even if you can't see it from where you sit."

And so another question rises for us this Advent: **Is our hope dependent on visible results?** Do we only hope when the world looks like it's changing? Do we only trust God when we can measure the impact of our work? Or can we—like John, like Jesus, like Isaiah—practice a hope that does not rest on proof, but on **perception**?

Jesus invites John to trust that God is moving even when the empire remains intact. Even when prophets die behind bars. Even when the world looks brutally unchanged. What a word for us today.

For activists who see policy rollbacks and laws overturned.
 For caregivers exhausted by systems that don't support them.
 For educators pushed to the limits.
 For pastors who've navigated trauma and grief.
 For artists creating beauty amid scarcity.
 For anyone who has dared to dream of a better world.

Hope is not measured by what we see. Hope is measured by what we choose to look for. And Jesus tells us where to look:

Look where the hurting find healing.
 Look where marginalized people hear good news.
 Look where life is renewed in places of death.
 Look where community rises in the cracks of broken systems.
 Look where kindness interrupts cruelty.
 Look where justice whispers its first fragile notes.

Not grand victories.
 Not empires toppling.
 But small, stubborn signs of God's unfolding dream.

Jesus doesn't condemn John's wavering. In fact, he lifts him up: "Among those born of women, no one is greater." John's question—his doubt, his fear—does not disqualify him. It **humanizes** him. It **connects** him to us. And it teaches us that **trembling hope is still hope. Faith that questions is still faith.** Advent does not ask us to manufacture optimism. It does not demand that we silence our fears. It does not call us to pretend we aren't tired or heartbroken.

Advent asks us to bring all of that—our emptied hope, our unanswered questions, our fear that nothing has changed—to the Christ who meets us with tenderness:

"What do you see?
 What do you hear?
 Look again."

Somewhere, even now, something new is springing forth – in the world, in Christianity, in our community of faith, and in your and my personal life. We may not see it clearly. We may not feel it yet. But God is at work—in places we don't expect, in ways we cannot control, in people we might overlook.

This is resilient hope.

Hope that survives doubt.

Hope that breathes in prison cells and hospital rooms.

Hope that rises in protests and in quiet prayers.

Hope that looks again and again, even when the world grows dark.

This Advent, God invites us to trust that there is more unfolding than what we can see. And to live, even sometimes fearfully, as people who refuse to give up on that unfolding. For when we are running out of hope, God is still at work – at work in the world, at work in this community of faith, at work in and through our personal lives.

Amen.

Resource:
A Sanctified Art, Advent 2025.
Chatgpt