

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

Who could use some good news right about now?

Our world is in a fearsome state, our country badly divided, our planet in peril.

This past week I made four hospital visits and did two funerals

and the homeless memorial – I went six months without that kind of activity.

And I don’t even have my Christmas tree up yet! I need some good news.

John the Baptist needed some good news. John was a truth-teller.

Eventually he told the truth to the wrong person, telling King Herod

that he was morally out of line marrying his brother’s wife.

That got John thrown into Herod’s dungeon.

He’d 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” –

and had heard his voice. He was sure as he can be...

but even the faith of John the Baptist can get weak under pressure.

Enough time in a dank, dark dungeon, cut off from the light, even John doubted.

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 in Bethany across the Jordan,

“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

This, from the man 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 the 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.

Can we do that in our times of doubt, when we feel bound and helpless in the dark, in the prisons of our own lives and circumstances, when we can't see any evidence of God – Instead of caving in upon ourselves or shutting God out, can we send out friends, and ask each other, “Hey, is this true?

Is Jesus for real? Is he who he said he was, who we thought he was?”

Doubt is an integral part of a living faith. Remember, the opposite of faith is not doubt, it's certainty. Faith means believing in what you cannot yet see.

But we can see signs and glimpses. 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 church.

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.”

Remember, one way we carry God's contagious love into the world

Is by conducting the power of God into human life.

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.

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,

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 tell our God stories.

We all share the ministry of John the Baptist – to prepare the way for Jesus.

We are preparing the way for Jesus to come every time we encourage

the faith of another, or tell our story of our faith in God through Jesus Christ.

Our teachers prepare the way for Jesus to come in Sunday school,

helping our kids to build a foundation for their natural faith.

Our greeters prepare a way for Jesus to come,

welcoming people warmly into our church.

We will prepare the way for Jesus to come through our initiative with feeding,

with vulnerable youth, soothing troubled hearts, inviting people to trust God.

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

whether in church, or in out in the world –

we prepare the way for Jesus to come somewhere, in someone's heart.

It is the activity underlying all our activities: preparing the way for Jesus.

Jesus said that as great as John the Baptist was, the least in God's kingdom

would be even greater. That is our gift – to do even greater things than John.

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
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.