

"Confront Your Doubts"

Text: John 7:18b-23

God grant *not* that we prepare to receive the Christ Child into our hearts on Christmas Day, for surely he resides there even now, but that the Savior we now have might never leave – and that we might thereby be fully prepared for his bodily return when he comes to judge the living and the dead. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians, there is a fine line between confidence and overconfidence, but that difference is almost always painfully obvious. Most folks appreciate the former and despise or fear the latter. The difference is important for reasons other than just personal taste. Confidence is being certain of what you know, and then acting on that knowledge. Overconfidence is being sure of what you only *think* you know, and then foolishly acting on your ignorance. While confidence tends to create a sense of calm in others, overconfidence does just the opposite. It frightens them because it is usually only the overconfident person himself who thinks he knows what he's doing. The key is to base our confidence on only that which can be trusted.

Which is not to say that confident people never have doubts. Far from it. In fact doubts are not just possible, they are necessary. Failing to ever question our convictions is the perfect recipe for overconfidence. The question is: *What is the right way to address or answer those doubts?*

Our text for this morning involves a supremely confident man – John the Baptist – and the doubts that were apparently created by certain circumstances and expectations in his life. One of our goals this morning is to identify what John did to confront his doubts, and to thereby learn from his example.

The text that will guide us in this study is found in Luke's Gospel, the 7th Chapter:

^{ESV} **Luke 7:18b-23** *John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"* ²⁰ *And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'"* ²¹ *In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight.* ²² *And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive*

their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. ²³ *And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*

These are the precious words of our God. Acknowledging that these words are not meant to entertain but to instruct, and that they are not only objectively true for others, but *subjectively* true for each one of us, *individually*, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

The first question after reading this text ought to be obvious: *"What happened to John the Baptist?"* John was the relative of Jesus, maybe even his cousin. His mother Elizabeth and Mary had met when both had been carrying their special sons. John had actually leaped in his mother's womb when he came into the presence of Jesus. It is inconceivable that Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah would not have shared these things with their son. Thirty years later John, on seeing Jesus by the Jordan River on two different occasions, had pointed to him and said, **"Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the World."** John had even questioned the need to baptize Jesus, which John nonetheless did at Jesus' command. Since his was **"a baptism of repentance,"** his objection had obviously been based on his understanding that Jesus had no sin of which he needed to repent. John then was also present to hear the voice of God, declaring Jesus to be his Son, and to see the Holy Spirit descend in the form of a dove and land on Jesus. What all of this means is that John clearly knew who and what Jesus was.

So, again, what changed? How did it come to be that John felt the need to send two of his disciples to Jesus to ask him if he was in fact the Promised Messiah? John was, after all, a thoroughly confident man – so confident in his mission and life's work that he dedicated himself to that work body and soul. As a Nazirite, he had given up nearly all of the pleasures of life enjoyed by other men. He had fearlessly and consistently condemned the evils of his day – calling the hypocritical Jewish rulers a **"brood of vipers" to their face**. When asked by those he baptized what they should do, he did not hesitate or vacillate. He knew the answer and told them clearly. This was also the man that Jesus himself described as the greatest man ever born.

Given all of this, how then could it come to be that this strong, resolute, confident man suddenly felt the need to send two of his men to Jesus for an answer to his question: **"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"**

Some Bible students are of the opinion that John sent his men not for John's sake but for theirs. In other words, John wanted them to hear the answer from Jesus himself, and to see Jesus with their own eyes. John had always known that he himself **"must decrease, and Jesus must increase."** John always knew and freely confessed that his job was simply to prepare the way for the Savior, and that when the Savior came, John must and would fade into the background.

While this explanation is thought-provoking, the circumstances, together with Jesus' reply, indicate that that was not why John sent his men. John asked because John wanted to know. John asked because he had doubts.

Why? What caused his uncertainty? To answer, we first need to ask a question: *Why did John send two of his men to ask his question? Why didn't he go himself?* The answer was that he *couldn't* go. He was locked up in the dungeon of Herod's prison. In fact that's probably when and where the doubts began.

John didn't speak to the people with his own words. He spoke the message he had been called to speak. Listen again to his words in Matthew 3:7-12: ***But when he (John) saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ ¶ "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."***

Do you see the problem with which John must have been wrestling? Where was the **"ax"** that was to be **"laid to the root"**? Where was the **"fire"**? Where **"the winnowing fork"**, the rescue of the good and the condemnation and destruction of the evil? *"Why, for that matter,"* John might well have been wondering, *"am I languishing here in prison when I was sent to announce the coming of the Messiah – the one who would avenge the righteous and set all things right?"*

Evidently John had fallen into the same misconception as those other Jews who had been waiting for the Messiah. He was expecting a kingdom on earth and the righting of the wrongs of society. And yet there he was, the Great Forerunner, imprisoned and helpless. John had seen none of the changes he expected, Jesus wasn't doing anything to free him, and all that he had prophesied seemed, from his perspective, to be hollow and false.

It's no wonder he had questions, but a careful look at our text tells us that his were the healthy sort of questions. There is nothing to suggest that John doubted that Jesus was in fact **"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the World."** There were two parts to John's proclamation. The first was pure grace, the second was pure judgment. John wasn't having any trouble with the grace aspect of Jesus' mission. What he was wondering about was the judgment part. He knew Jesus as the kind and gentle Lamb, who came as God's own sacrifice for sin, but his doubts came when he saw no evidence of the other work of the Messiah – the fire and judgment part. His question to Jesus then was probably this: *"Should we go on looking for another sent from God who will bring judgment, right the wrongs of our world, and usher in that kingdom on earth that we are all looking for?"*

Can anyone really blame him? He had come to expect one thing, and in his mind he was seeing the exact opposite. The main thing that he had come to expect – the very thing he spent most of his time and energy foretelling – didn't seem to be happening.

Yet here, even in what looked to all the world like John's darkest hour, John actually shone the brightest. Why? Because John took his doubts to Jesus. Ask yourself this: Would a man who had come to regard Jesus as a fraud or a liar send his disciple to *that man* to seek answers? Obviously not. John had questions, and he wisely directed them to the only one he believed could answer them, to Jesus.

Note also the answer that Jesus gave – two answers really. First he answered by giving the disciples of John visible evidence of his power and love. They got to see his miracles. Second, he answered by quoting an Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah 35, and by pointing to himself as the fulfillment of that prophecy. Why is this so important? Again, two reasons. First, it is an indication of John's faith. If John had lost his faith, Jesus never would have offered proof *that was based on that faith*. In other words, it was only because Jesus knew that John trusted implicitly in the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament that he answered John as he did – by pointing out that he was in fact the

fulfillment of that prophecy. But there's even greater wisdom at work here, but to understand it we first need to hear more of that prophecy from Isaiah that John was quoting: **"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert."** (Isaiah 35:3-6)

Did you catch the mastery of Jesus' answer? Not only was Jesus fulfilling this prophecy, *the prophecy itself was answering John's doubts*. It did so by defining or clarifying what God had intended all along by sending his Son. First the Holy Spirit through Isaiah said **"Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."** But then note how the Holy Spirit goes on to define exactly what that **"vengeance"** and **"recompense"** would look like – and it was nothing like what the Jews (including, evidently, John) had come to expect: **"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert."** The Jews had failed to let *God himself* define what his intentions were; that is, what sort of vengeance and recompense he came to bring. He came to right the wrongs not of society but of sin – *our* sin. The wrongs he came to right were *our* sins against God, not the sins of others against us. The **"recompense"** he came to offer was to God for the wrongs for which we were responsible. This he did by offering his perfect, sinless life as payment in full on the cross.

By quoting this one section of God's Word, Jesus addressed and answered all of John's questions – and thereby also removed any doubt. The problem was never that Jesus wasn't doing what God himself had foretold; the problem was that man had come to expect what God had never promised.

Take this simple truth to heart and learn from it. Learn first the amazing nature of God's **"vengeance"** and **"recompense"** – carried out not upon the sinners that deserved it but upon his own Son – the only man in history that did *not* deserve it. Second, learn that doubts and questions will almost certainly trouble us all the while we are stuck here in this vale of tears. The solution is never to deny those doubts or questions but to confront them, honestly, and to carry them to Jesus, as did John. Finally, recognize that

as John's doubts were caused by his own misconceptions and ignorance, so are ours, but that doesn't mean that we have to sit helpless in the prison of our own making. The good news is that the same truth that freed John by dispelling his doubts is also right here in front us – God's Word, open and available. Use it. Trust it. Cling to it. The same answers, the same comfort, the same clarity and confidence that came to John the Baptist can and will also be yours.

But only if you go there, to Jesus and his Word. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Zephaniah 3:14-20** Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!
¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. ¹⁷ The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. ¹⁸ I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. ¹⁹ Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰ At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the LORD.

^{ESV} **Philippians 4:4-9** Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸ ¶ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

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The Third Sunday in Advent – December 13, 2015

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 68 (Red Hymnal)

"The Advent of Our King"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Zephaniah 3:14-20) Many Old Testament prophecies have both short-term and long-term implications – applying first to Israel as a nation and then to Christ, and God's New Testament Church. Since there has been no fulfillment of this prophecy in connection with Israel as a nation, we are right to see it as a prophecy only of Jesus Christ, and the peace of his advent.

Psalm 85 (Supplement page 40) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (Philippians 4:4-9) Our First Lesson offers some solid, practical, divine counsel on just what Christians should regard as the perfect example of conduct at all times. We sometimes dismiss such counsel as too vague or too simplistic to work "in the real world." God does not make such mistakes. We are to apply these words personally, and live them.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 72 (Verses 1-3) (Red Hymnal)

"Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers"

The Sermon – Text: Luke 7:18b-23 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Confront Your Doubts"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

Offering followed by the Prayers (Hymn 89 Verse 1 & 5)

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 310 (Red Hymnal)

"Thy Table I Approach"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution -Hymn 305 (Red Hymnal)

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 72 (Verse 4) (Red Hymnal)

"Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (42) Average (48) Wednesday (30)

This Week at St. Paul:

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| Today | -9:00 a.m. | – Sunday School and Bible Class |
| | -10:00 a.m. | – Worship Service w/ Holy Communion |
| | -11:30 a.m. | – Fellowship meal |
| | -12:00 p.m. | – Annual Voters' and WF Meetings |
| Wednesday | -5:45 p.m. | – Confirmation Class |
| | -7:00 p.m. | – Final Midweek Advent Service |
| Next Sunday | -9:00 a.m. | – Christmas Eve Rehearsal |
| | -10:00 a.m. | – Sunday Worship Service |
| | -11:00 a.m. | – Fellowship and coffee time |

CLC News – Nominations are now being accepted for two positions at ILC: a professor position to fill the upcoming vacancy of Prof. John Pfeiffer and a fulltime maintenance position. Please see Pastor Roehl for additional information.

Meetings – Both the Women's Fellowship and the Voting Assembly are scheduled to meet today following the fellowship meal. Please share in this kingdom work by participating.

Council Notes – All Council members plus the Pastor were in attendance for the December 6 meeting. Treasurer Adams reported that offerings for November exceeded budgeted needs by \$820. The Council has narrowed the organ search to two possible choices. Their findings will be reported to the Voters this morning. Mark Johnson, Brian Fettig, Loren Ollenburger, and Keith Mantz have agreed to be considered for the two open Council positions. Council approved the stenciling of the Common Table Prayer above the serving counter. The Christmas Eve service was moved to 5 pm. Council approved the use of the fellowship hall for a member-conducted CCW class. The final draft of the 2016 Budget was approved and will be recommended to the Voters. Proposed CBP estimate is \$12,700.