

December 12, 2021 – Luke 7:18-35 & Philippians 4:4-7

There's a scene in the movie Forrest Gump where Forrest is explaining the origin of his name. He says that his mother named him after her distant relative, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, who would later found the Ku Klux Klan. Forrest's mother explains that there's a reason she has chosen this name for him. It's to remind him that, sometimes, people do things that just don't make no sense.

I don't know why, but I think of that quote whenever there's an event like what took place in Oxford, MI a couple weeks ago. Or Waukesha, WI before that. Or during the seemingly countless acts of violence that occur around our country every year. Because, sometimes, people do things that just don't make sense. We don't know why those men in Michigan and Wisconsin did what he did. The evidence is still being gathered. The motives are still being pieced together.

But, honestly, it doesn't really matter. There is no reason to murder anyone in cold blood. There is no possible explanation for those events. No conceivable justification for their actions. We might end up calling one or both of them insane, but that doesn't really help. They are still, in the end, people doing things that just don't make no sense. And never will.

It's often, at times like these, that people find their faith tested. They get confused. They get frustrated. They get angry. And underneath it all, what begins to appear is the most dangerous thing of all: They begin to doubt. And doubt is a powerful thing. Even in the smallest doses, it has an enormous effect on us.

It's perfectly natural to doubt. Dangerous, as I said. Sinful? Absolutely. But natural? Common? Even expected? Yeah, it's those things too. Especially after a tragedy. And as it turns out, our Gospel lesson for today addresses doubt in the midst of tragedy head on.

But to understand what's going on here, we have to rewind to last week's Gospel lesson. To John the Baptist and his ministry by the Jordan. John has been preaching a message of repentance and the coming judgement for quite some time now. He is the messenger preparing the way for the Lord. Announcing to the people that the Messiah is coming soon. And they need to get their hearts right with God before He shows up.

He preaches this message to everyone. Even to King Herod himself. Because there's plenty for which Herod needs to repent. Herod has just recently gotten married to his second wife. He divorced his first wife so that he could marry his niece, who had also divorced her husband (and uncle, her second husband's brother) because he had been implicated in an attempt to poison his father and was subsequently removed from the line of succession for the throne. It's a tangled web of sin.

So John has lots to say to King Herod. And Herod reacts in two different ways. On the one hand, he seems to respect and fear John greatly. He really believes this man is a prophet sent from God. On the other hand, he's too much of a politician to let John get away with that kind of bad P.R. So he has John arrested, thrown in prison, and threatened with execution, so that John is, effectively, put on death row.

Which is where we find ourselves in our Gospel lesson today. John the Baptist is rotting in prison for the crime of telling the truth about a corrupt, perverse monarch. And he's quite obviously ready to die for his message. Countless prophets before him have died for delivering God's Word to powerful men. There's nothing unexpected about it. It's a pretty normal hazard of the job.

No, I'm quite certain John has no hesitation at all about dying for the truth. What he's wondering is why he has to. Why is he in prison right now? Why is he facing excusing? Because he knows the Messiah is here. He knew it before he was born. When Mary's voice could be heard even in Elizabeth's womb and, still in the womb, John leapt for joy at the voice of the mother of his Savior.

He knew it when he first went out into the desert preaching a message of repentance. Announcing the coming of one so powerful that John himself would be unworthy to tie his shoes. He knew it the moment he laid eyes of Jesus and cried out, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." And he certainly knew it when he baptized Jesus in the Jordan River and saw heaven itself opened, the spirit of God coming down like a dove, and the voice of the Father echoing out, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!"

For literally his entire life, John has known that God himself was walking among us. The Messiah, the anointed one, the Savior of the world, was here. And that everything was going to change.

So why hasn't it changed? If Jesus is the Messiah, why has nothing changed? Why is wickedness still rampant? Why is King Herod still sitting in his palace? Why is John himself still sitting in prison waiting to be executed?

Now, don't get me wrong. John isn't deluded, like many of the people. He isn't expecting Jesus to overthrow the Romans and establish some earthly, political kingdom. He knows better than that. He's seen the visions of the end times. He knows that when the end comes, there won't be any earthly kingdoms left to rule.

But he still expects a change. He's been announcing it for years. The Messiah was to come with power and judgement. With an ax to cut down trees who bore no fruit. With fire to burn up the useless chafe of this world. That's what we heard last week. That's what John expects.

But it isn't happening. The wicked continue to flourish. The righteous sit rotting in prison. And John begins to doubt. It may have only been a tiny crack in his faith. Perfectly natural. But dangerous nonetheless. And sinful, as doubt always is.

But what happens next bears an important lesson for us. Because it's easy for doubt to drive us away from God. It's part of our sinful nature. When our faith falters, we don't turn back to the one in whom we previously put our hope and trust. We turn away. We try to fill the crack of doubt with things of this world.

Over and over again, evil men do evil things. And doubt begins to creep up on us. Where was God? Why didn't he protect us? Well, we'll just have to be stronger. Smarter. Faster. Better. If God's not going to protect us, then we need to do his job for him. If he's not going to be our God, then we need to become our own gods.

Pretty soon, filling the crack of doubt has only made it wider. The less that we convince ourselves that we need God, the more that we begin to worship a different god. A god of self. A god of humanism. A god that says that there's no such thing as sin. And we're all basically good people. And if we just find that one magic cure we'll figure out everything. And there will stop being people who just don't make no sense.

But it doesn't work. It will never work. Because when humanity looks deep inside itself, it won't ever find the solution. All it will find is more of the problem. Because sin is the problem. And as long as sin exists people will murder other people. And children will die before their time. And righteous men will end up in prison while wicked men go free.

And you can try all you want to fix that. You can buy more guns or you can take them away. You can try to solve the problem with preparation or prevention or prison. Or whatever you like. You can try to fix the problem with every ounce of human strength and ingenuity. But you cannot fix sin. It is simply out of human reach.

And you can let that fact drive you into doubt and despair. Or you can do what John the Baptist did. You can turn to Jesus. And ask him, point blank. "What is going on? Are you the Messiah or aren't you?"

And you know what he'll tell you? "Look at Scripture. Look at what happens around me. Look at what happens when I show up. The blind see. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead come back to life. And the good news that God has forgiven you is preached to all who will hear it."

This is what happens when Jesus shows up. This is what he brings with him. An end to everything we hate in this world. An end to the sin inside of us. An end to the sin that causes tragedies every day. An end to evil itself. This is the blessing that Jesus brings to those who are not offended by him.

This is the reward... for waiting. For enduring. For suffering. And for listening. Listening to the words of Jesus. Even when it's easier to listen to the news or your neighbor or yourself. Listening to those harsh words of judgement that say, "You are a sinner, just like that boy in Michigan. Just like that man in Wisconsin." But also listening to those words of grace that say, "I died for them. I died for you. And I forgive you."

Jesus never promised it would be easy. He never promised it would make sense. All he promised was that he would fix it. That he would fix what we cannot fix. That he will fix sin itself.

This is how Paul can write those wonderful words of our Epistle lesson. Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I will say, rejoice! Why, Paul? You're sitting in prison. The victim of a corrupt Roman government. You're writing to a city where you were hauled into the marketplace and publicly beaten for preaching the Gospel. How can you rejoice?

Because the Lord is at hand. And if the Lord is at hand, there is nothing to be anxious about. If the Lord is at hand, then you can turn everything – every sinful thing in this world, every sinful thing you have done – over to him in prayer. And rest in the peace of God that surpasses all understanding. The peace that guards our hearts and minds from all doubt.

Because even when people do things that just don't make no sense, we are still in Christ Jesus. We are still in his love. We are still in his grace. We are still resurrected in him. The world and its sinful people will not make sense. But that's OK. For the Lord is at hand. And for that we still rejoice this day. Amen.