

Family Faith Discussion Questions

For Sunday December 4, 2022

Second Sunday in Advent

Whether you worship with us online or in-person, you may find these questions helpful in starting meaningful faith discussions at home.

Scripture: Isaiah 11: 1-10 and Matthew 3: 1-12

Helpful Background:

Isaiah 11

Isaiah is one of the major prophets of the Old Testament. (This designation between major and minor prophets has a lot to do with the length on their book, but also takes into account how influential the prophets' story is to the life of faith throughout history.)

Most scholars believe that the book of Isaiah as we have it today was written at different points of history. The book itself says that it is the visions of Isaiah in the days of King Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. We are also told that Isaiah's time as a prophet began the year King Uzziah died. From other sources we know this to be 742 BCE. The latest recorded activity is dated to 701 BCE. However, only chapters 1-39 can be traced to this period of time.

Chapters 40-66 are considered much younger in origin and are often referenced by scholars as Second Isaiah (40-55) and Third Isaiah (56-66). This does not mean that there was more than one prophet named Isaiah, but that later authors decided to add their chapters to this book. Second Isaiah can be dated to the 6th Century BCE, during the Babylonian Exile, and Third Isaiah can be dated to an even later period with a Palestinian point of view. We do not know why the work of prophet Isaiah and two other anonymous prophets were combined, but the combination was gradual. We begin to see Isaiah in its final form around the 5th century BCE.

Our passage this week comes from First Isaiah, meaning the historical figure who served as prophet to the people and advisor to kings. This passage is used during Advent because it shows Jesus' ties to the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. In Matthew we learn that Jesus can trace his lineage to King David, which means that the "shoot from the stock of Jesse" which Isaiah refers to in this passage, is Jesus. (Jesse was King David's father).

Matthew 3: 1-12

The Gospel of Matthew was most likely written between 80 and 90 BCE (AD). While tradition has attributed the book to Jesus' disciple named Matthew as the author, historically this is incredibly unlikely. The author was probably a male Jew who was a follower of Jesus's teachings and the Apostles, but would have been too young (or not even born yet) to be a disciple of Jesus while Jesus walked on Earth. Prior to following Jesus' teachings the author of the Gospel of Matthew was very familiar with Jewish customs, law, and legal aspects of scripture.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are considered Synoptic Gospels because so much of their content overlaps. Since scholars believe that Mark was written first, the authors of Matthew and Luke both must have had a copy of the Gospel of Mark when writing. They also had an additional source that they both used, in order to include information not in the Gospel of Mark, but found in both Matthew and Luke. Scholars call this source Q; no evidence or record of this work exists except in the similarities of Matthew and Luke's Gospels.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew was most likely writing to Jewish readers who were encountering the teachings of Jesus. The author most likely also had the goal of making sure that the Jewish heritage of Jesus was not lost as the Christian Church moved to include more and more gentiles (non-jews). This is why we have the details regarding Jesus' genealogy and birth that are included, lots of details about Jesus' clash with the scribes and Pharisees, and details about Jesus fulfilling the Messianic prophecies from the Old Testament.

Our passage this week in Matthew describes John the Baptist's ministry preparing the way for Jesus. John the Baptist was actually Jesus' cousin, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Mary and Elizabeth were cousins, and Mary goes to stay with Elizabeth after she becomes pregnant with Jesus. At that time, Elizabeth is also pregnant with John, who was born roughly 6 months before Jesus. I've always wondered how close Jesus and John were and if they discussed together Jesus' ministry prior to it beginning with John baptizing Jesus. *(More background info on John the Baptist can be found after the discussion questions for anyone interested).*

Questions:

Isaiah 11: 1-10

- During Advent, Christians read this passage with the lens that Isaiah is referring to the Messiah, who we know to be Jesus. How does this affect how you read this passage?
- How does it affect your relationship with God/Jesus to read verses 2-5, thinking about Jesus being the one to fulfill all of these things?
- How does it feel to know you will be judged by one who fulfills this? *(In verse 3-4 it says that he, aka Jesus, will judge us, but in very different ways to how the world judges us.)*
- In verse 6, we begin to hear about what is often called the Peaceable Kingdom, a reality that is very different than the world we live in. How do you respond to verses 6-9?
- What does the idea of this kind of peace mean to you?
- Is this kind of peace possible?

Matthew 3: 1-12

- In what ways do we need to prepare the way of the Lord in our own lives? How does John the Baptist's cry relate to us today?
- Does it affect your faith to consider the prophecies foretelling of Jesus and John the Baptist? Why or why not?
- If you had been a person to hear John the Baptist's proclaiming the coming of Jesus and invitation to repent and be baptized, would you have been one to come out of the cities to him? Why or why not? What do you hope might be the case and is that different than what you suspect? Have you ever experienced something in your life similar to this, being called to Jesus to repent/confess sins?
- What do you make of John's response to the Pharisees and Sadducees?
- Why do you think John addressed these people this way? What is John trying to say to them? What could John be saying to us?

Some extra background info on John the Baptist in case anyone is interested:

John the Baptist is a pretty interesting character. While scripture gives us some details, church tradition as well as archaeological evidence also tells us more about him. Scripture recalls the time when Elizabeth was pregnant with him, and Zechariah is struck mute after not believing the angel messenger telling them of John's importance (Luke 1: 1-25; 57-80). Scripture tells of John's work baptizing people, preparing the way for Jesus (Matthew 3: 1-12; Mark 1: 1-8; Luke 3:1-20; John 3: 22-36). We know that John was thrown in prison, and we know that King Herod had John the Baptist beheaded (Matthew 14: 1-12; Mark 6: 14-29; Luke 9:7-9). *If you've never seen or heard musical Godspell, it's worth watching. You'll find plenty of versions online. The one from 1973 is still a great one, but a unique version. Ton's of churches and other organizations have recorded versions a bit less unique. Godspell opens with a Song and speech from John the Baptist "[Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord](#)". This [different version used in worship](#) is good too.*

We know that prior to baptizing people to prepare the way for Jesus, he lived in the wilderness. John's clothing of camel hair, wild appearance, and strange diet of locusts and honey are mentioned specifically and would have informed early Christians of John's role as Elijah reincarnated, foretold by Isaiah to occur to prepare the way for the Messiah.

From archaeological evidence, we think that he didn't just live on his own in the wilderness, but formed some kind of community that endured even after his death and Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The letters to John and the Gospel of John found in the New Testament probably came from this community of Christians in later generations.

Many scholars believe that this "Johannian community" lived in what is now called Qumran, located in the desert of Israel. (Prior to excavating the Qumran settlement in the 1950s, scholars could tell that the letters of John and the Gospel of John came from similar sources because of the difference in language they use compared to other books of the NT. *(Think how different the prologue of the Gospel of John (chapter 1) is from other Gospels)* Once Qumran was excavated, they found other writings that used similar language about Christ belonging to this community.)

This community is responsible for the preservation of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were found in caves near Qumran in 1947. These ancient documents contained copies of several Old Testament books, but were older than any other copies scholars previously had. (Which allowed them to retranslate some parts of books that had mistakes or other errors in later manuscripts. It also allowed scholars to learn more about the evolution of these books and have more accurate information in dating books or portions of books. ALSO, The Dead Sea Scrolls were originally found by a Bedouin shepherd boy originally, it's [a cool story](#) if you are interested).