

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

Have you ever seen an unfinished icon, those images of Christ or His saints? It's fascinating to watch as it invites you into a world of blessed uncertainty. Usually, the portraits are surrounded by shimmering gold leaf. I had always assumed that they applied that gold as the finishing touch. That they'd apply the paint and ensure that every line was in place, every brush stroke even and perfect, making sure that the figure was beautiful and worthy of contemplation before adding that expensive aura, that golden halo around their heads.

But recently, I watched a video online of an iconographer creating a piece. After preparing the surface of the wood and lightly outlining the figure, she began applying the gold. So if you were to take into your hands this unfinished icon, you'd be invited into a world of blessed uncertainty. You'd look at the figure, and you can't make out who it is. You have no idea if you'd like the finished product when it's done. But what you do know is, regardless of who that figure is, in the end, it will be glorious. Because that gold is there. A blessed uncertainty.

Our text from Matthew for this morning is a bit like that because in a sense I think that's the experience of John. John is trapped in more than Herod's prison. John is trapped in this experience of blessed uncertainty. When we read this text of John in prison, we know about the uncertainty of John. We can see why. Jesus, the one to whom John pointed and proclaimed the Messiah, is out there preaching about the Kingdom of God, and yet there John sits, the forerunner, in the pit of misery and sorrow.

But we don't want to overemphasize this uncertainty either, this doubting, this asking of Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come?" Because there is something else there in the cell with John. There, with John, is a blessing that he is holding on to. After all, when John sends his disciples to Jesus, what do they ask? "Are you the one who is to come, *or* should we wait for another?" Notice they do not ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or is God just not sending anyone?" "Are you the one who is to come, or should we just give up hope?" "Are you the one who is to come, or should we take matters into our own hands?" No. For John, the question is that he is not sure about Jesus, but he is certain about the promises of God. He's experiencing a blessed uncertainty.

John is holding fast to those promises of God, much more than sometimes, I think, we hold on to them. After all, for most of us, our whole lives, we have known Christ. We grew up in the church immersed in the Gospels that we have often put aside the Old Testament. We have forgotten what Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, and the prophets, and what John and the other faithful people of Israel had been holding on to and waiting on for so long. We have Christ, so we let all that go. But the whole Old Testament, that is where the promise of the Messiah is found, the promises of the one who is to come. They are the very word of God, and they will be certain. And if this Jesus doesn't fulfill those promises, then Jesus can go. For John and his disciples, they will continue to hold on to those promises of God. So he sends his disciples to Jesus, "Are the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?"

And that's what's beautiful about Jesus's response. He takes the very promises of God that John holds on to and offers them back to John. The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. The deaf hear. The lepers are cleansed. The dead are raised. The poor have the good news preached to them. These are the words of Isaiah. Jesus weaves together prophecies from Isaiah chapters 35 and 61 in the hope that John will now see these promises coming in the flesh.

But see, that's the problem. John knows those promises, and he knows that Jesus is leaving something out. Yes, Isaiah 35 talks about the blind seeing, the lame walking, and the deaf hearing, but it also says, "Say to the anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come in vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come to save you.'" Isaiah 61, yes, the good news will be preached to the poor, but it also says there will be a proclamation of liberty to the captives, freedom to those who are in prison, and most importantly, that in addition to proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, there will be a

proclamation of the day of vengeance of God. And John doesn't see that in Jesus. Think about what that means. That's the terror of this text. John is in prison, and Jesus comes, and Jesus doesn't release him. This prophet, who prophesied this world-encompassing reign of God, ends up a pawn in a little political game of a territorial tyrant, and his head ends as a party favor on a plate.

And that's not just a terror for John; that's a terror for you. Because you know what that means? It means the Kingdom of God is not exactly the American dream. It means that sometimes your prayers in this life will not be answered. That uncertainty you have might still be there. As a Christian, you might be persecuted by your enemies, and that struggle in your family because of your faith might worsen. As a child, you might helplessly watch, wondering why God isn't doing anything as cancer continues to progress through your parent's body. As a parent, you might look at your child and desperately cry out, questioning why God isn't doing more despite all your prayers. And we come before God with those prayers in our hands, and Matthew this morning gives you this unfinished icon and invites you into a blessed uncertainty.

I told you about when they apply the gold to the icon, but I didn't tell you how. It's remarkable. The icon writers take this mixture of red clay and animal skin glue and apply it to the icon. Then they sand it down until you have a very smooth, thin surface. Then, the writer takes that icon and breathes on it, and takes a gold leaf and puts it on top of the clay. The moisture from the breath forms a bond between the clay and the gold. But even more than that, this breath is symbolic, symbolic of creation. God taking clay in His hands, breathing upon it, and bringing it into the glories of eternal life.

I hope you saw Jesus doing that in the text. Because that's what He does for John. When Jesus sends word to John through his disciples, Jesus doesn't only quote the prophecies of Isaiah. Jesus adds His own word for John. A breath of the Spirit from the very mouth of God. And Jesus says to him, blessed is the one who doesn't fall away on account of me. And in that blessing, do you see what Jesus is doing? He's taking this clay of John's existence; He's taking John's fear, his despair, his doubt, his imprisonment; He's even taking John's future beheading, and He's saying this is mine and it will be blessed.

Blessed are you when people persecute you because of me, for yours is the Kingdom of heaven. Regardless of what this world does to John, he will be glorious in the Kingdom of God. And how can Jesus do that? Well, that's the mystery of His mission, right? The mystery that John himself has seen. When John was out there baptizing in the waters of the Jordan, calling everyone to publicly confess their sins and get in that water. When Jesus came, John tried to shove him aside. This is no place for the Messiah, standing in place of sinners, yet that's where Jesus went. The first, faint tracing of the figure of this Messiah. And what John won't see is the day when this icon hangs dead on the cross, and that is the day of divine vengeance. That is the day when Jesus will take all the vengeance of God and have it poured upon Himself so that He can bring all of the glory of God to all of God's creation.

Yes, now He's proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, not saying anything about the day of vengeance of our God. Why? Because He's taking that into Himself. And because of that, we can participate in this glory of God. And that's the beauty of this work of Jesus. Yes, there will come a day of judgment for those who don't believe in Christ. Yes, Christ will return, and there will be a judgment for them, but to those who do believe, that day of vengeance has already come. And blessed are you if you don't fall away because of Jesus. For you will be glorious in this Kingdom of God.

I asked if you ever have seen an unfinished icon, and I'm assuming you thought, "Well, no I haven't." Maybe I should have asked the question differently. Maybe I should have said, "Have you looked in the mirror today?" Because that's what you are. You are God's unfinished icon, His clay in this world. And no matter what this world does to you, your end in Him will be glorious. And as icons inspire prayer, so this text from Matthew inspires us today to speak that ancient Advent prayer, "Amen. Yea, Lord Jesus, even so. Quickly come. Amen."