
Blessed Is Anyone Who Does Not Stumble Over Me

**An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Third Sunday of Advent – Year A**

John the Baptist is in prison. That detail is not incidental to the story; it is essential to it. John is not asking Jesus a question out of idle curiosity or theological speculation. He is asking because things are not going according to plan. He preached repentance, pointed to Jesus, and spoke truth to power. Now he finds himself confined, silenced, and waiting.

When John asks, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?” he is not simply seeking clarification. He is asking a question many people of faith ask in one form or another: Can God still be trusted when life does not match the story we believed? Can faith survive disappointment?

Jesus’ response is striking for what it does not do. He does not answer the question directly. He does not say, “Yes, I am the one,” nor does he explain why John must remain in prison or how events will unfold. Instead, Jesus points to what is happening: the blind see, the lame walk, the poor hear good news. And then he concludes with a beatitude that names the real tension at the heart of the exchange: “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble over me.”

The word translated as “stumble” is important. It does not describe outright rejection. It suggests being tripped up, losing one’s footing, or being thrown off balance by how God appears in the world. Jesus seems fully aware that he does not meet the expectations of those who longed for a decisive, unmistakable intervention. Even John, who once proclaimed Jesus with confidence, now struggles to recognize God’s work from the confines of a prison cell.

This dynamic is deeply familiar. Most of us don’t waver in our faith because we stopped believing in God. We waver because God does not do what we expected him to do. We anticipated clarity and found confusion. We expected progress and encountered stagnation. We hoped for deliverance and instead experienced delay.

Notice, though, that Jesus does not rebuke John for asking the question. Jesus does not shame John for having doubt or feeling disappointment. Jesus does not even offer certainty or understanding.

Instead, Jesus offers a blessing. “Blessed,” he says, is the one who does not stumble over me. Here, blessed functions as reassurance. You might think that your confusion puts you outside of God’s purpose, but Jesus is saying the opposite. He is saying that you are not excluded because I am not what you expected. He is saying, “You are seen and God is at work here.”

This reveals something essential about the nature of faith. Faith is not primarily about holding the right ideas or maintaining unshakable confidence. It is about remaining open to God’s presence over time, especially when that presence does not feel immediately helpful or satisfying. John is learning, painfully, that God is not acting on his timetable. But Jesus’ response insists that delay does not equal absence.

This is where the language of joy in Advent must be managed carefully. Joy in Scripture is not the opposite of sorrow; it is the opposite of isolation. Joy emerges not when circumstances improve, but when God’s presence meets us within time as it unfolds. John remains in prison, and yet Jesus declares a blessing over him. It’s not that Jesus thinks prison is good or that suffering is inherently redemptive. It’s that God has drawn near ... even there.

This is the heart of the gospel. God does not wait for life to make sense before showing up. God does not

require certainty before offering presence. In Jesus Christ, God enters history as it truly is: slow, unresolved, and often painful. Jesus does not free John from prison, and the text does not ask us to gloss over that fact. Sometimes God's action is not rescue, but accompaniment, not solution, but solidarity.

Such a vision can feel scandalous. We want God to act decisively, to fix what is broken, to bring clarity and closure. But Jesus' ministry—then and now—often appears as small, patient signs of life that resist being turned into proof. These signs invite trust, not triumph. They ask for patience, not performance.

To not stumble over Jesus, then, is to resist the temptation to walk away when God refuses to become useful on our terms. It is to trust that God is still at work even when the story feels unfinished. This kind of faith is not heroic. It is stubborn. It is the faith that stays, waits, and refuses to let disappointment have the final word.

The promise embedded in this beatitude is simple but profound. God is not offended by questions. God is not threatened by doubt. God does not withdraw because life feels stalled. God remains quietly, persistently, and faithfully present over time. God is first a God who is with us

For those of us who feel, like John, confined by circumstances we did not choose or uncertain whether the story we believed still holds, this word is for us. We are not failing at faith. Faith is happening while we wait, in our questioning, and in our refusal to walk away. Blessed are we when we stop tripping over God and discover that Jesus has been walking with us all along.

Amen.