

Many people all over the world are anticipating the December 1 premiere of a podcast about the lost tapes of Nelson Mandela, the South African president and Nobel Peace Prize winner who led his country to see the end of its racist apartheid policies. Although he died in almost a decade ago this month, these tapes will compile hours upon hours of interviews taken with Mandela over the course of the time while he was in office. This podcast's release happens also to coincide with the opening in London this month of a musical based on Nelson Mandela's life. Written by a South African songwriting duo, the musical has been seven years in the making. The productions of these two very different upcoming reflections on his life demonstrate just how much of an impact Mandela's life had on the world. His was an amazing life that spanned the better part of ten decades and saw him rise from relative obscurity in a small village to become the first black president in a very racially divided South Africa.

What I think most people find compelling about Mandela's life is the twenty-seven years he spent in prison serving what was supposed to be a life sentence for speaking out against the oppression and injustices of the ruling white elite. He suffered mightily for sharing his vision and speaking out for the cause of freedom. It's somewhat of a miracle that during those long years in forced labor in the limestone quarries that his heart did not become as hard as the rock he was forced to dig. And while people are fascinated by that awe-inspiring graciousness—his ability eventually to forgive his captors—I'm sure for him the time in prison was excruciating. I'm sure that for him it was gut-wrenching to sit there behind those stone walls, behind those iron bars, and wonder what was going on out there in South African society. Was it truly changing? Were the steps of freedom and equality for all races still marching forward without him? Which new leaders were taking up the cause of justice, and, of course, would his own captivity ever end? While he sat in prison I'm sure these questions occupied his thoughts. A giant of the 20th century, Mandela ended up dying with much of his vision realized, although that country (and all countries, for that matter) still has a long way to go.

Today, millions of Christians gather to pause and consider the life and witness of one of the giants, you may say, of the first century. John the Baptist, revolutionary prophet and agitator of the powerful elite, appears in our Scripture texts this morning very much like Nelson Mandela, in prison and awaiting execution. Regardless of where you stand on the man and his willingness to use shouting and other outlandish tactics to achieve his aims, John the Baptist remains known, among other things, as one of the people who symbolizes the Jewish people's disgust with the Roman military regime. Enormously popular in his day, John gave voice to the people's anger at the religious elites, and to the dissatisfaction with the apathy of all of God's people when it came to living in hopeful expectation of God's reign. He was ready for God's kingdom to come and he was willing to speak out for it.

In the earliest days of his career, John the Baptist had been out in the wilderness, on the outskirts of society, preaching about the arrival of the Promised Messiah and baptizing people as they repented of their sins. He had also taken issue with the corruption of Herod Antipas and his family, speaking out against their injustices and indiscretions. They had him captured and thrown in prison... a reminder to all that there are often harsh consequences to standing up for God's justice!

This morning we see that John, like Mandela many centuries later, is starting to wonder what is going on outside that prison's stone walls and iron bars. John the Baptist is starting to wonder whether things in the world were truly changing. Was this new leader, Jesus the Messiah, taking up the cause of justice and ushering in God's kingdom? Was Jesus the one they had all been waiting for in God's revolution to overthrow the powers of evil or should they wait for another? I also bet John was wondering if his own captivity would ever end. After all, if the Messiah comes to give sight to the blind and set the prisoners free, then that would have some very positive outcomes for John. So with an urgency that we can only imagine, John sends his disciples to Jesus wanting to know what's up. Is there hope for a new world? For God's sake, when will it be here?

Millions of Jesus' followers pause each and every day to reflect upon their own lives in this twenty-first century. Maybe you're one of them. Your accomplishments, your achievements—what do they amount to? While it's true they their scale may not be on the scale of Nelson Mandela's or John the Baptist's, but they do matter. Our lives, no matter how insignificant they seem, are avenues for God's peace and mercy to break into the world. And yet, we are imprisoned. They are not prisons of stone walls and iron bars, but they are prisons of doubt and fear and apathy. On the one hand, we know and trust that Jesus' birth among us has brought us freedom. It has released us from sin's slavery and we have tasted that new life. But on the other hand many of us still take offense to Jesus' claims that God's kingdom has come, or is coming. We look around and say, "OK, Jesus, I hear you...but what about Ukraine and the suffering of its people? What about shootings like the one in Uvalde, TX or on the football team at the University of Virginia? What about the systems of racism and economics that still oppress so many people? If the kingdom you bring is so good, Jesus," we cry out, "when will we be released from these prisons, too? Are you the hope of God's reign, or not?"

Understanding this tension—or at least acknowledging it—is a fundamental part of Christian faith. Even at times when our faith in God's power is strong and vibrant, we still feel a frustration, like John did, that this revolution of love is not happening quickly enough. We are impatient with its progress. We grow tired of the fight. Disillusioned, we go to Scripture, to worship, to the leaders of the faith to be moved and motivated, to hear again about this redemption and receive some inspiration, but then get discouraged when vindication doesn't arrive in the form we anticipate or in the manner we expect. This is what it means to take offense at Jesus and his kingdom, and based on Jesus' own words this morning to John, it sounds that Jesus might expect this reaction from us from time to time. I think Jesus fully realizes we grow weary of living in this tension where one age of sin and death and violence is so slowly giving way to God's reign of righteousness, where the kingdom of darkness is so gradually being overtaken by God's kingdom of light. We long so desperately for the arrival of that kingdom, as the prophet Isaiah describes, where the blind receive their sight and the lame walk and the poor have good news brought to them.

When John's disciples reach Jesus with his questions of impatience, Jesus responds by telling them to return to John with the news of what is happening, news of what Jesus has done. He sends them back with news of reassurance. As it turns out, some of the blind have regained their sight, not counting the thousands who've been given the new eyes of faith. The feeble knees have become strong. Those bowed down under the burdens of sin have been lifted up. Furthermore, the poor—both the literal poor and the poor in spirit—have had good news brought to them. They are like little dispatches from the front lines of the movement. In Jesus Christ, God's kingdom is on its way.

In this time of hopeful expectation, we must remember we are not the only ones who feel torn by the tension and we are not the only ones who cry out from our prisons of fear and dread. Jesus, himself, feels the tearing of it more completely than anyone else. On the cross, Jesus' own body is torn with this tension, crushed by the weight of our impatience with his kind of peace and our discouragement with his style of justice. In so many ways we reject very vision of the hope he brings and how he brings it, and yet he still dies so that we might have it rather than withholding it from us. We must not forget that as we grow frustrated with this kingdom's full arrival, we have one great message that John the Baptist never heard: Jesus is risen. The very one who is torn for us, who feels that awful tension of the revolution's resistance—that one rises on the third day for you and me.

So, in this meantime, as this wait grows at times excruciatingly tense, let us find ourselves, at least every once in a while, in the role of those messengers that Jesus sends back to John. You know what that makes us? Chaplains! Chaplains are those who visit people in prison. Let us be chaplains, gathering again for in worship, at youth group, in Bible study, in private conversation to share with each other our little dispatches from the front lines to reassure ourselves that God's kingdom coming. Let us renew each other's faith in Jesus' arrival among us with the good news we hear and know about now.

I've got one such dispatch: yesterday our food pantry distributed food to thirty families, which is close to their all-time record. When I stopped by the church yesterday, I saw a long line of people in cars waiting patiently for bags of groceries that you helped provide. The volunteers were joyful and ready to receive them, and the guests were grateful and polite. Impressed with the volunteers' hospitality, one guest, in fact, asked pantry team leader about the level of government assistance our pantry receives. "None," our volunteer informed the guest. "All of this food is provided directly by the people of this congregation." Apparently the woman almost broke into tears at news of such generosity.

And I have another one. This week it was announced that Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, one of the advocacy and public justice arms of my denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, received a \$15 million gift from MacKenzie Scott, former wife of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. This gift is the single largest in the organization's 83-year history. LIRS President and CEO, Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, explained this week that the unprecedented funds come right as they are resettling loads of Afghan refugees, people fleeing the war in Ukraine, and asylum-seekers along the U.S.-Mexico border.

That right there, my friends, is enough good news to this John the Baptist who from time to time needs to hear the revolution is still going strong. "Strengthen the weak hands," says the Prophet Isaiah this morning, "And make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear!'"

With your strengthened hands, continue the Advent work of bringing Christ's presence into the world around you. Like Nelson Mandela, you are freedom-speakers. *The lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.* It is all but an echo of the best news of all, which raises our hope for the new kingdom coming: Jesus is Lord. He is risen!

Thanks be to God!

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