

So...if you will indulge me for just a few moments. I know that the whole sports thing isn't everyone's jam, but sometimes, the deep ways it colors my world just come out and zing me when it comes to the Word of God. I am the odd person that at the intersection of sports and the Holy Spirit is where I end up finding sermon material. So, as you all know, of all my sports things, there is nothing deeper for me, nor more frustrating than my lifelong allegiance and devotion to the Detroit Tigers. Baseball is my bread and butter and Lord help me, I will sit through every 100-loss season they throw at me and never throw in the towel because they're my team, no matter what.

Well, in the midst of what has been a very, very, *very* long rebuild, one that found us trading away all our most valuable players and leaving the team a shell of the one that went to the World Series twice in a matter of a couple of years, the one thing that fans were constantly told was, we've got some of the best kids in our farm system. Give it a few years for these kids to hit the majors and look out. The "benefit," for lack of a better word, of being a bad team is that we've racked up quite a few top three draft picks. Well finally, this year was declared *the year*, we were bringing the kids up. They were ready and this was going to be their time. Opening Day arrived with the inauguration of one Spencer Torkleson, the long vaunted first

baseman that we took first overall in the 2020 draft. There was a huge thing where tales from the clubhouse revealed that Miguel Cabrera, our previous first baseman, our all-star and leader, had gifted Tork with his first baseman's glove, a passing of the torch to the next generation.

The first month or so of the season things felt...ok. He was learning, there were flashes of brilliance, and it seemed like the promise of a new hope, a bright future had come true. And then...well...the baseball season is a long one, and for a 23 year old kid to have the expectations of an entire city on his back is a daunting prospect. Things slowed...things quieted...and then came the inevitable news flash: Tork had been sent back down to Toledo, our Triple-A team. The Tigers equivalent of the Norfolk Tides. It felt like a gut punch, not just for fans, but especially for him. It was about a two month break, and fans wondered, was he really the guy we thought he was. Was our number one pick, the guy who we had been promised going to flame out this quickly and dash all of our hopes for the future before it even started. By September, with the season long lost, it was quietly announced, he was coming back up. The pomp and excitement had eased, and low and behold...the kid started to perform. The batting average went up, the hits piled on, his presence in the field was dominant. It came with the realization that ok, maybe he wasn't going to be *the star* we

imagined, that was clearly going to go to our new hot shot center fielder whose rookie call-up was quieter than Tork's, but...he was still going to be *our guy*. He wasn't exactly who we were anticipating, but his presence, his approach, his calm leadership, it was just what we needed.

Now not to make too much of a stretch of a claim, but for some in Detroit, Tork's arrival was greeted with the fervor of the Messiah, the fervor of those along the banks of the Jordan clamoring at John's words, and the reaction when things weren't going as imagined, well, they echo a little bit of our gospel this week. It's a message that after last week feels jarring and a bit confusing, leaving us wondering if we're dealing with the same John the Baptist or not. It leaves us wondering, is *John* who we thought he was, as John sat and pondered in prison if *Jesus* was who *he* thought he was, who he proclaimed Jesus to be, who he was preparing to give his life for.

We make a pretty big jump between gospels from last week to this week. Last week was John at his prime, preaching fire and repentance at the Jordan and baptizing all who came while proclaiming the promise of the Messiah. This week though...things have changed, starkly and harshly. We're well into Jesus' ministry and John finds himself in prison. His outspoken nature has gone a step too far when he was arrested for criticizing the king *to his face*, in public for his questionable marriage practices. However,

this was simply the last straw in a long line of reasons why the authorities wanted John out of the way. He was the one who kicked off this Messiah fervor after all, and who kept fanning the flames so having him out of the way would only serve their desires to diminish Jesus' popularity.

Despite his imprisonment, news continues to reach John from the outside world. He continues to receive updates about the ever-increasing grip of the Roman Empire on their land, on the abominable economic practices of all of those in authority, his own Jewish siblings included. He hears stories of military strangleholds and people leaving in fear of Empire, and starts to wonder...wasn't this what I proclaimed the Messiah would come and solve? Weren't these the exact kinds of things I was talking about when I said he would come with the Holy Spirit and fire? Didn't I promise people that the Messiah would come and save them and isn't the Roman Empire *the most obvious thing* that we need saving from?

With the amount of time on his hands, with little to distract him, John's mind starts whirling. What if he made a mistake? What if he risked his life for nothing? What if he was about to lose his life for a fraud? What if those stories his mom and dad told him while he was growing up about his cousin were all a bunch of bunk? What if he foreran the wrong guy? What if he bet on the wrong horse? What if...what if they still had to wait for the

Messiah? What if Jesus wasn't him? They are heartbreaking questions, and John, not one to mince words decides to get to the bottom of it. He sends some of his disciples to Jesus to ask him point blank, are you the one we've been waiting for, the one I promised people, or do we need to wait for another person? It's blunt and pleading. Please tell me if I got this wrong, if I placed my faith in the wrong person.

Jesus responds not quite directly but with an answer that halts the questions and re-emphasizes the kingdom he has come to bring. He tells John's disciples to return with a message of the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the lepers cleansed, even the dead raised. He responds with the words of Isaiah, the very same prophet who foretold John's role as the messenger. He says he is the Messiah who has come not with military might and power and glory that will bring an empire to its knees, but who has come with true salvation, healing, hope, and ultimately love, which in its own, less obvious way, can do far more detrimental damage to the cause of kings. Jesus doesn't critique John's questions and doubts, but simply says, he's the guy. John didn't get it wrong. The Messiah is here, the kingdom is coming, it's just come in a way John didn't quite expect.

We don't always like to think of it, but in a lot of ways, we can sympathize with John as he sits in the midst of his doubts and questions this

morning. I'm not sure that any of us would fully articulate it in this way, but we do place expectations upon Jesus, more often than not of the fire and brimstone type. We want Jesus to come into the world and smash down the walls of empire that we want smashed down, though we are very clear about the empires we don't want him to touch. We want Jesus to bring fire and judgment upon those whom we have deemed worthy of such things, while also resting quite well assured that we are not those people. We want Jesus to be the kind of Messiah who works according to our expectations, which clearly know which people need to receive what kind of treatment, while being very clear that we are the people most deserving of grace, love, and forgiveness in the midst of our sinfulness. It's just those other people and their sins who aren't so worthy.

And at times, we see the harshness of the world, and we wonder, is Jesus, is God really around or are we waiting for another? Yet, the message of this season brings to bear the ultimate truth that the Messiah has come, he has come not with fire, but with the water of life, not with judgment, but with forgiveness, not with exile but with grace. Jesus has come into this world and breathed into it the means for all of God's people to help this kingdom come. We spend so much time looking for God and wondering where God is and if God is going to show up that we fail to realize that God

has shown up, we simply have to look down at our own two feet. We are God's best representation in the world. We are going to be how people know the Messiah has come, we are going to be the answer to are you the one that was promised or are we to wait for another?

When we spend our time spewing hatred, exclusion, discrimination, and judgment into the world, all the while proclaiming that we are people who love Jesus, our Prince of Peace, we are going to make people wonder if this Jesus guy we talk about is the one that was promised. When we say that our expectations are of empire smashing and a reorientation of values and hope, and then continue to bow at the feet of empires of wealth, greed, and power, well then people are going to wonder if we really know the Jesus we're talking about all the time.

Jesus is coming into the world, and we boldly declare him as Messiah, but we must ask ourselves, are we prepared for the Messiah he has come to be? Are we ready for a kingdom of love, of grace, of forgiveness, of hope, of peace, of shattering the bonds of empire which chain us? Are we ready for the Messiah who told John the Baptist that the kingdom was all around him in the healing of the nations and the restoration of life to those who were lost? Are we ready for the Jesus we proclaim we want or when we think he isn't what we need are we going to ship him back to the minors? **AMEN!!!**