

Expectations around Santa Claus run high. We expect him to provide just the right gift to just the right child. What contributes to the anxiety of Christmas is wondering if after all the work people will really be happy when the great day comes. Is Christmas worth the effort?

Anxiety about ^{the effort} ~~success~~ also plagued John the Baptist. The John we meet in today's Gospel is very different from the John we met last week. Last week at the Jordan River, John the Baptist proclaimed a fiery message about repentance. He challenged authorities and provoked the fear of doom. Today we meet John in prison, on death row. In place of the crowds he has a few disciples; in place of the free-flowing river, he stands in a barren cell; and in place of an electrifying public speech, he surreptitiously sends a timid message back to Jesus, a message which aches with doubt and anxiety. "Are you the one?" John asks. ^{He} ~~He~~ who so confidently proclaimed the coming of Christ when the sun was shining, now faces his own mortality, his impotence, and his fear of failure. Was it worth the effort? He is so confused, he sends messengers back to Jesus for an answer. Apparently Jesus did not visit John personally in prison. Whether he could not or would not we do not know. But he sends the messengers back with a reply that John should have known the answer all along--Glinda explaining the ruby red slippers. Just look and listen, Jesus says. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. The answer is there all along.

On our darkest days we harbor doubts, too. Was it worth the effort I put in to my family, my job, my faith, my church, my relationship? Sometimes we lock ourselves in a kind of emotional prison that makes us wonder is the Messiah really there, or have we missed him? I think Jesus would reply to us in much the same way he replied to John. Just look and listen. People ^{search} ~~search~~ for gifts out of love, sales clerks are helpful, returns can be made, and after-Christmas sales will come again. Families want to show love; the workplace wants to respect labor, the church wants to guide the way, and even politicians and lawyers really do care about the public good. Advent is the church's desperate attempt to reassure us in the darkness of our doubts, that life is worth the effort.