



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

**Sermon for Advent 3**

December 14, 2025

# What Do You Come to See?

## Matthew 11:2–15

<sup>2</sup> *And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples<sup>3</sup> and said to Him, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”*

<sup>4</sup> *Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.”*

<sup>7</sup> *As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup> But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. <sup>9</sup> But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> For this is he of whom it is written:*

*‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,  
Who will prepare Your way before You.’*

<sup>11</sup> *“Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. <sup>12</sup> And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. <sup>13</sup> For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. <sup>14</sup> And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. <sup>15</sup> He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”*

Beloved in Christ, what do you come to church to see? Hopefully, not a preacher whose goal is merely to please you, who talks mainly about prevailing opinions, and who speaks out of both sides of his mouth. For that kind of preacher never challenges you, never cuts to the quick, never desires truly to sooth and comfort you, and never really speaks to your soul. Instead, he seeks only praise for his eloquence, and his ability to make you feel better about yourself. For the times I have bent to that kind of pressure, I repent.

What do you come to church to see? Hopefully, it's more than the pretty windows, the beautifully decorated worship space, and the God-honoring ceremony. For the liturgical space and conduct are not in and of themselves the Gospel; they merely serve to highlight it. Nor are they principally the riches the Lord gives here, but rather the vessels in and through which those riches are given.



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So, what do you come to church to see? A preacher who, in the name and by the authority of Christ, preaches to you the Lord's Word, and most especially God's calming, relentless, unhesitating mercy? That is ultimately what matters, is it not? Not that you're okay, or that things will get better, or that you've simply "gotta believe." But that the Lord Jesus forgives you, embraces you, loves you, accepts you, and has mercy on you in spite of your sin, in spite of your shame and guilt, and in spite of your continual desire to manage your salvation on your own and to make yourself the vehicle of God's grace.

For making our own way, solving our own problems, determining when we're ready for God, listening only for what pleases our fancies and satisfies our itching ears, doing what we think is best despite what God says – these things are precisely what John the Baptist preached against. For he did not say, "Prepare your own way, make your own paths straight, build your own road to God." No, John was the one who prepared, made, and paved your way to God. By his preaching, he leveled pride and smoothed out despair. By his preaching and baptism he made a people ready for the Lord Jesus. Nor did he, by his preaching and baptism, simply introduce folks to Jesus or point Him out to them. John gave Jesus entrance into the souls of men, causing them to hear and believe what Christ's coming into our flesh is all about: rescuing all of humanity from its self-made death, bearing its sins and crosses in His own body, and being its only true and *real* Savior.

But that's not just the preaching of John the Baptist. That is the message of every Christian preacher, through whom the Lord God works to bring to light the hidden things of darkness and to reveal the secret meditations of the heart – all so that God might give His true and lasting comfort, and a peace of mind and spirit that the world cannot even begin to give.

So John is the model for every preacher, whom the Lord then uses to prepare His way with nothing more – and nothing less – than the preaching of His Law, the clear proclamation of His Gospel, and the delivery of Jesus Himself through the baptism in His Blood and the communion in His crucified and resurrected Body.

Yet every preacher is himself a human being who needs saving, a sinful human who has doubts. Like John the Baptist, every preacher wonders whether this Jesus is for him, and if He will really support and sustain him through the great challenges of his life and ministry. Preachers today ask the same question John asked: "Are you the Coming One, or should we look for another?"

That's the question John sends his disciples to ask Jesus in today's Gospel. Because that is THE question, isn't it? "Jesus, will you really come through for me? Jesus, does all this preaching and do these sacraments really make a difference? Jesus, will you ever



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give up on me? Jesus, are you here with me now, in my darkest grief, in my hardest time, in my deepest anguish? And Jesus, are you what some say you are – only for those who are good, only for those who've made it, only for the strong and healthy, only for those who are confident and have a vigorous faith? Are you only for them? Or are you for me, too?" That's the heart of John's question. As he sits in prison, John and his disciples are disheartened, and the question really is: "Where is my Jesus now?"

Listen carefully, beloved, to the answer Jesus gives. For it's not just for John or his disciples. And it's not given by an annoyed Jesus who answers brusquely so that He can get on with more important things. And it's not an answer that's true only when Jesus is visibly present and physically healing or preaching. It's the answer He *always* gives – the answer He speaks clearly to you now: "The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

Now what does that mean? It means that Jesus is precisely for those who are laid low, for those who are unworthy, for the weak and stumbling, the despairing and inconsolable, for those who feel they have no hope, and who have nowhere else they can go for help. And Jesus is precisely for those whom John cut down with his axe, for the brood of vipers and the hypocrites. He's even for those who insist on making their own way, who think they're all they really need, and who work feverishly to earn His favor and blessing.

In other words, it's for all of us that our Lord Jesus comes. For the salvation of every human soul, He suffers and dies. And to help and comfort you, He washes you in His bloody baptism; He gives you His Body and Blood to eat and drink; and He freely, quickly, and willingly speaks to you His holy Absolution.

*That* is what you come to church to hear and receive. Not the confirmation of your self-made goodness, but the clear declaration that our Blessed Lord Jesus takes you in just as you are, forgives and loves you in spite of your sin, your doubts, and your fears, picks you up, wipes you clean, and sets you on the new path paved by John the Baptist and walked by your loving Savior, who leads you to everlasting life.

And blessed are those who are not offended, or put off, or disappointed in this Jesus. For He gives you the best of Himself – in fact, He gives you His own self fully and completely. Receive Him, beloved, not as you think He should come to you and be for you, but as He truly is. Rejoice in the salvation He gives you here in His house, and whenever you hear His Gospel and receive His Sacraments. And take to heart the undying help He gives you as you travel His path. For in this way you are among the truly blessed who hear His Word and keep it. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen