

Sunday, December 15, 2019 – 3rd Sunday in Advent
“What Have You Come Here to See?”

Matthew 11: 2-15

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Story Applied

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

PEVR. P. E. V. R. Pause. Empathize. Validate. Resume. It's from an old commercial when DVR technology was brand new – I wonder if they'd be so excited to advertise it if they knew that everyone would just skip commercials in the future.

The commercial features a stereotypical male zoned out in front of his television, remote in hand. He's watching a football game I suspect when his wife enters the scene. She looks a bit unsettled and upset. He barely notices her, but then remembers that he has the latest and greatest in TV technology. Pressing the “Pause” button on his remote he knows that he will not miss a moment of the all-important game. He looks at her and says in a deadpan voice, “You had a hard day.” She smiles as if a miracle has happened and walks out of the room. He smiles and presses the resume button and his game picks up right where he left it. The lesson: PEVR: Pause, Empathize, Validate, and then you can Resume. It's funny unless of course it's true.

Sometimes I feel that way about God and this whole church thing. I mean what are we doing here anyway? Aren't we just practicing a little PEVR with God? Pause – taking a little time out from the real world, putting life on hold for an hour or so. Empathize – nodding our heads – yea, isn't terrible, “I a poor miserable sinner.” Validate – God sure is wonderful isn't He? Resume – What time is it anyway? How long do you think this sermon will be? Is there communion in this service today? And there are baptisms on the same day as the Christmas program? You do know it's semifinals for fantasy football?

But maybe we can salvage the acronym. Maybe PEVR could give us a glimpse into our text and John the Baptist and Jesus and the disciples and the crowd are more like us than we ever imagined.

John the Baptizer was in prison. His life had been “paused.” Maybe he had expected it to be this way, maybe not. The gospels report him very confidently proclaiming the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. He was baptizing people in the Jordan River. Last week you heard how he stood up to the leaders and politicians of his day – he called them “a brood of vipers” and asked, “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” He was in prison because he had

condemned King Herod for taking his brother's wife to be his own. The media must have been having a hey-day with that one so Herod threw him in prison to shut him up.

Maybe your life has paused recently. Sometimes they are happy, anticipated pauses: the birth of child, the near completion of another semester of school, a new job in a new place, the upcoming time off work for Christmas. But even the happy, anticipated pauses bring their own share of stress and frustration. And when you add them to all the less-than-happy, unexpected pauses of life it all starts to get a bit overwhelming: a sudden illness, a tragic death, a child who sorely disappoints you, your report card, a business venture that didn't turn out the way you had hoped, the end of a marriage.

What do you do when life pauses? Well, first let me tell what God does. God empathizes. Did you know that the word empathy comes from two Greek words *en* and *pathos*, meaning "in" and "suffering?" To empathize is to insert yourself into someone else's suffering. It is coming along side of another person and putting yourself in their shoes. Human beings can't really do it. In fact the dictionary defines empathy as an "imaginative projection of one's own consciousness onto another being." You know how empty it seems when someone says, "I know just how you feel." No one can know that.

Except God. For He does not merely imaginatively project Himself into our being. God actually takes on our being. This is what we are getting ready to celebrate. This is what Christmas is all about. God comes into our suffering by being born into a tiny, helpless, infant's body. God became flesh. God can say, "I know just how you feel." He experienced it in the life of Jesus. Paul wrote to the church at Philippi that "even though Jesus was true God, he laid aside His divine power, and accepted the full impact of being human, even death on a cross."

The birth of Jesus sets the Christian faith apart from all other religions. This is the only place that you will hear that God loves you so much that He crawled into your suffering so that you can have hope and a future. Every place else will tell you only get what you deserve. Here Jesus gets what you deserve.

Jesus takes your suffering, not just so He can know how it feels, but to take away its sting and render it all harmless. Jesus' life, His suffering, and finally His death on the cross means what has happened, is happening, and will happen is in the hands of a loving God who

is at work to bring you safely through this life, which is what God intended for you all along. Again it is Paul, this time to the Romans who says, “The present suffering is not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed.”

So what do you do when life pauses? John the Baptizer sought validation. He sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are the One who was to come or should we expect another?”

When Lewis and Clark crossed the continent they and their party spent two years of battling nearly insurmountable problems – hunger, fatigue, desertion, threat of attack, severe illness, and death – the party had reached the headwaters of the Missouri River. All their advance information had led them to believe that once they reached the continental divide, they would face about a half-day portage, and then reach the waters of the Columbia River and float safely to the Pacific Ocean. The hard part was behind them. Or so they thought.

In what is now western Montana Meriwether Lewis left the rest of his party behind to climb the bluffs that would enable him to see the other side, hoping to see the waters that would carry them the rest of the way. Imagine what he felt when, rather than seeing a gentle sloping valley as expected, instead what he saw was the Rocky Mountains! What do you do when you think your biggest problems are behind you, only to find out that you have just been warming up?

Jesus did not scold John for seeking validation. Too much of our glorious, precious, Christian faith gets boiled down to scolding: You foolish people; try harder; go to church more; get more involved; give more money. Jesus pointed John’s eyes back to the work He was doing. He was renewing and restoring God’s perfect creation. The things listed are the very things that kept a person from entering into the temple, from coming into the presence of God. “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” To that, from the vantage point of time He adds for your hearing, I was crucified, died, and was buried and on the third day rose again from the dead and ascended back into heaven, and I am coming again. “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of Me!”

When life pauses, when you wrestle with doubt, when you ask, “are you the One, Jesus, or is there another” God does not turn your eyes to look inside yourself for the answer. He lifts

our eyes to see Jesus again. Faith is not the sort of thing that can be acquired by trying harder. Imagine someone standing in Yellowstone National Park saying to you, "I find myself doubting Old Faithful. I'm just not sure it can be trusted." What advice would you give them? Not, "Try harder to believe!" The best advice would be, "Just hang around Old Faithful for awhile. Get to know Old Faithful." And because Old Faithful is faithful, the better you know it, the more you will trust it.

It's the same way with God. Trying harder won't get you more faith. But hang around God for a while. Get to know Him a little better. And because God is faithful, the more you are around Him, the better you know Him, the more you will trust Him. Take a risk that God is really here this morning to meet you in these words you are hearing, in the company of the people around you. Take a risk with a family member, a friend, even a new person. Forgive someone as you have been forgiven in Jesus.

Jesus addressed the crowd and asked three times – "What did you go out into the desert to see? What did you go out to see? What then did you go out to see?" Why did you come today? What do you see? Open your eyes. Come to Bethlehem and see Christ the Lord you newborn King. Don't be afraid. Only believe. Now, Resume. In Jesus' name, Amen.