Good morning St. Philip’s! I greet you in the name of the Captain of Salvation, Jesus the Christ! There are four games remaining on the Steelers schedule all of which they must win in order to make the playoffs. The Duke Basketball team continues to amaze! On Wednesday, over 100 people were killed in an earthquake in Indonesia’s Aceh province and two juveniles have been charged with setting the fires in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

Let us pray - O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

So here we are, here we are again blessed to be able to come out to worship in the House of the Lord on this the Third Sunday of Advent in the liturgical life of our church. We pick up the biblical narrative here in the 11th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. I would like to take as a subject this morning Living With Doubt. There are three thoughts that I would like to lift from the text this morning.

The first thought is belief and conviction comes easily during the good times. In last Sunday’s Gospel reading from Matthew chapter 3 John says this of Jesus, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” This week we pick up the biblical narrative later in the Gospel of Matthew in the 11th chapter. However John, of whom, Jesus praises with these words, “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” This statement is not a rebuke of John, but an indication of the radical and transformative nature of the age to come. Those in the Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus will be greater because they will have experienced the glory of God in the light of the Resurrection – an understanding of the future beyond anything John envisioned. But my question is this, what happened to John the Baptist from the time that John baptized Jesus to the time of John’s imprisonment? Well, his situation has changed. In the time that has elapsed John denounced the legitimacy of Herod Antipas’ marriage who was the governor of Galilee and Perea. John has found himself in jail awaiting his death. The times have changed for John – he most certainly had a growing ministry as he had begun to grow in popularity such that even the
Pharisees and Sadducees had begun to attend his services out in the wilderness such that he was planning to build a mega-synagogue. The times were so good for John that he may have even considered changing his diet from locusts to lamb, his wardrobe from the burlap drapes to something more fashionable and suitable for his growing ministry. Things were going well but then he said something that the king didn’t like and now his fortunes have changed. Thus, John is now having doubts as to who Jesus really is as adversity has set in. Does this sound familiar to us in our lives today? Living with Doubt!

The second thought that I would have you consider is to doubt is inherent to the human condition. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed the following, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” Now, Jesus knew he was going to die however there appears to be some human doubt that seeps in here which would have certainly been expected by one who knew death was imminent. There is also some evidence of doubt here in John as he sits in jail awaiting his death. I don’t know if he could see the guillotine or not from his jail cell; for, it is one thing for us to contemplate death during the times of our youth, health and prosperity but it is quite another when we are staring death square in the face. John and Jesus were not just contemporaries in ministry they were also cousins and friends. John was having a dark night of the soul in his questioning – “Are you the Messiah or are we to wait for another?” We would have questioned Jesus too by asking if you are the Messiah why you haven’t come to get me out of prison. Why haven’t you rescued me from this death sentence that I have been given? You are my friend and you know my heart and my work. Jesus responded to John’s disciples but not to John directly, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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 brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” Can you hear John saying what many of us would have said, Jesus that’s all well and good that your ministry is going well and I am happy to hear that you have raised enough money to build a parish hall but would you please come and get me out of jail? I don’t want to die. But, St. Philip’s in those moments of inevitable doubt in our lives I love what happened next after Jesus finished praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. It reads this way from the Gospel of Luke, “then an angel appeared to Him and gave Him strength.” We are not to let doubt consume us when there is no answer to why we lost that child, why we got cancer, why is my relationship broken, why do I seem not to have enough money to pay my bills, food to eat, or why did this happen to me? Please know that an angel will appear to give us strength in the same way that it appeared for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Living with Doubt!

The final thought that I would have you take away from this text is let us build each other up when adversity sets in. Once Jesus had given John’s disciples instruction with a message for John in prison, Jesus then began to praise John as he questioned those who encountered John in the wilderness by asking what then you went out to see. What did you expect? “A prophet. Yes, I tell you more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written. See I am sending a messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you.” Many times when we are at our
lowest as John was here just to hear a positive and uplifting word works wonders for our psyche. If we know that which we are doing or have done with our lives was not in vain and that some good has come from our efforts. Then, that reassurance serves to sustain and propel us to achieve more than what we thought we could. Word probably got back to John that Jesus had been talking positively about his efforts. Have you ever felt that your efforts were in vain but then someone said something, or a thank you card showed up in the mail, or someone shared with you how your words, financial help, or advice gave them the wherewithal to go on? John had to take some solace in the fact that in spite of his doubts that he had done something right with his life to have Jesus praise him here on earth. Executions were public in first century Palestine but we can surmise with certainty that as they brought John out to be beheaded someone in the crowd could be heard saying, “Among those born of women no one has arisen greater that John the Baptist.” Let us build each other up St. Philip’s because you never know what someone is going through and how a well placed word will aid them as they navigate their way through the guillotines of this life living with doubt. Amen.