The beginning of our passage today completes an address that Jesus has given to the crowds. Chapter 11, from which we read today, begins with John the Baptist sending some of his disciples to talk to Jesus. John is in prison and can’t come himself; and perhaps being arrested has discouraged John to the point that he needs some reassurance that his work was not in vain and his prophecy about Jesus is correct. The disciples come to Jesus and say, *are you the one? Or must we wait for someone else?* Jesus answers by instructing them to tell John that *the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them.* He also says, *blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*

John’s disciples go away, and Jesus begins to speak to the crowds about John: *just who did you think you were going out to see in the desert? Someone who would break at the slightest breeze? Someone soft, who cares more about comfort than truth?*

So on the one hand, he tells John’s disciples to take heart; and on the other hand, he takes the crowd to task for not appreciating who John is. The implication there may be that the temple leaders leaned whichever way the wind blew—in other words, they kept power by being in cahoots with whoever the Roman leadership was at the time. Or perhaps that the religious leaders themselves were more worried about their own comfort than they were about the plight of the poor, oppressed and suffering.

And Jesus is very emphatically saying that this is *not* who John is. John is not a willow-the-wisp that followed the winds whichever way they were blowing. John is not a wearer of find clothes. John is a prophet in the old style; and he even goes on to call him Elijah.

From there he begins to chastise the present generation. They are like children, he says, who just don’t seem to know what they want. *You’re not dancing with us, you’re not mourning with us!* he has them crying out. Perhaps, *You’re not dancing to our tune!* Still it is the religious leadership that Jesus is talking about here. On the one hand they criticize John for being a straight arrow, on the other they criticize Jesus for being a drunkard.

It’s funny how this is what happens—even today we can see it. When someone comes along who threatens the status quo—and this is what Jesus and John both did—often it isn’t what they stand for that is criticized, it’s their personality or their character that are attacked. For example, protestors have been called “snowflakes” and “idiots” for taking challenging the way things stand. It’s a way to dehumanize the protestors so that their message is weakened.

Because John and Jesus both challenged the state of affairs that existed in their day, first they were derided for who they were—John, because he lived in the wilderness and didn’t drink or eat regular food, and Jesus, because he did drink and eat whatever was put in front of him. By the time of this passage John had been arrested, and Jesus could see what was coming. But that didn’t stop him from putting his message out there.

Do you suppose at some point people said about Jesus, “why does he have to be so *in-your-face* about this stuff? What groups do we hear that about today?

Our reading today skipped a portion of the text, but I think it’s important to hear it in order to put all of this together. This is what the passage says next:

*20Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. 21“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. 23And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.”*

Those are some strong words, right? No wonder the lectionary committee leaves them out. But again, I think it’s important to hear what Jesus is saying here. First of all, he’s talking about deeds of power that he has done in Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum—cities where the “good people” live. Places that we might expect would be moved by John and Jesus’ acts of power—baptism, healings, and so forth. Even the disciples of Jesus had been given the power to heal and drive out demons and offer peace where they lodged.

On the other hand, Tyre and Sidon and Sodom were places that were known to be “bad” for their worship of other gods or their lack of hospitality to strangers. D. Mark Davis, of the *Left Behind and Loving It* lectionary blog, points out that

*In Ezekiel 26-28, the prophet raises laments over Tyre (mostly) and Sidon, neighbors who have treated Israel with contempt (28:24). They are Phoenician cities known in NT times as wealthy commerce cities, even under Roman rule.*

In Genesis Sodom, along with Gomorrah, were destroyed due to their sin, whether or not the nature of the sin is fully understood. The point Jesus is making is that these cities, the “baddies” if you will, would do what the “goodies” would not if faced with the deeds of John and Jesus—they would repent. It would be sort of like us in America saying that Las Vegas or New York City would fare better than, well, anywhere in the Bible belt that claims to be more righteous, more Christian than these big cities that are often thought of as godless. (thanks again D. Mark Davis!) For even though Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum were places that knew of Jesus and John, had seen their power and deeds, they—and here Jesus is poking the leadership—they had not believed, and in fact were plotting against John (who is already in prison) and Jesus (who soon will be killed) for upsetting the status quo.

The chapter does end on a note of good news, however. After the things Jesus has said over the past few weeks-- about being a dividing sword, about his followers being separated from their families, about the necessity of his followers taking up their own cross—he does have some good news: those who are weary with heavy burdens can find rest in Jesus; those whose follow Jesus will find his yoke rests easy on their souls. Perhaps some of the most misunderstood words in the New Testament, they would have been quite reassuring for the people of the day—and for us too, even if in a different way than we suppose. When Jesus talks about a yoke, he is most likely referring to the Law of Moses, the Torah. At the time of Moses the law was often referred to as a *yoke*, something that the newly formed people God of needed to keep them on God’s desired path.

We learned this week in our class about Abraham that the law, which was given at the time of Moses, had largely been disregarded for centuries, possibly until the exile (another time when the people needed a framework to keep them aligned with God’s path) or later. By the time of Jesus, however, the law had become more of a burden than a help; following it was a task that many people, especially the poor, couldn’t keep up with. It is to these people, the poor who were largely ignored by the law keepers, and those oppressed by the law, that Jesus is speaking. When he refers to the weary ones who carry heavy burdens, he’s talking about those who are burdened by the law; when he says his yoke is light and in him they will find rest, he means that those who follow him will have his presence to help and guide them. Indeed, it will be more restful for the people to have Immanuel, *God-with-us* as a guide than to try to negotiate the law by themselves.

*Take my yoke upon yourselves*, he says to the poor and oppressed as well as us today, *and I will give you rest; learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart.* We are to follow not where the wind blows, not carry a burden to great to bear, but to also be gentle and humble of heart. To be Jesus’ disciple is to have Jesus with us wherever we go, offering his peace to a broken world and finding some rest in the process.