

Is Jesus Really the One?

Third Sunday of Advent

Matthew 11:2-11 Isaiah 35:1-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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What do you think of when you hear the name, John the Baptist? What images come to mind? Most of us remember him as a fairly rugged individual: living in the wilderness, dressing in camel's hair clothing, eating locust and wild honey, and proclaiming the message, "Repent and be baptized, for one greater than I is coming." I'm not too sure I'd want to run into a guy like that in a dark alley.

Yes, we usually remember John as the one who came to prepare the way for the Lord. And we also remember him as the one who baptized Jesus in the river Jordan, the event that marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. But in today's assigned lectionary Gospel reading, from Matthew 11, we learn that a bit of time has gone by since then and that John has been arrested and thrown into prison.

It is surprising, however, that it now seems like **John the Baptist is having some doubts as to Jesus' identity**, for he sends some of his own disciples to approach Jesus and ask, "**Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?**"

I don't know about you, but I find it somewhat reassuring to know that someone even as faithful as John the Baptist had doubts and uncertainties as to who this Jesus of Nazareth really was. It's reassuring when even the smartest kid in the class has to ask a question for clarification. It's comforting because **many, many people of faith today, perhaps yourself, also struggle with doubts and uncertainties concerning Jesus.**

What usually happens when people in mainstream congregations question traditional church orthodoxy? First, they are often met with resistance, especially by religious leaders. When that happens a variety of things usually follow. People either stop asking their questions; or, they leave organized religion altogether; or, they head to the Unitarian Church.

I believe there is another option, however. And that's to **find a church theologically progressive enough, as well as open and nonjudgmental enough, to allow others to be wherever they currently are in their journey of faith, especially when it comes to specific, individual beliefs.** That is the kind of church College Hill strives to be. And it's up to each one of you to get that word out. For here, we believe that it's a very good thing for people of faith to ask, and re-ask the questions they have about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the role of the church, and so on. That's part of what it means in our *Mission Statement* when we define ourselves as being committed to "build an inclusive community of faith."

During this Advent season it is especially important for you and me to reflect upon our own understanding of this person named Jesus. And don't be afraid, God is not threatened or discouraged by our questions, doubts, and uncertainties. Also, remember that doubt is not the opposite of faith. In fact, there could be no faith

without the element of uncertainty. John the Baptist's experience reminds us that no one is immune from doubt. Moreover, it's that very experience of doubt that often fuels our own search for answers, and our own quest to experience the presence of God.

Here in our biblical story, then, we have Jesus faced with the question, "Are you the one who is to come or should we wait for another?" **It's very important to notice that Jesus did not come out and simply declare, "Yes, I am the Messiah, as foretold by the prophets of old." That's the traditional church answer, but not Jesus' answer. Instead, he answered John's disciples in terms not of what someone should believe about him, but rather in the reality of what people heard and saw for themselves.**

Jesus replied, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." In other words, look at the evidence, see for yourself, and come to your own conclusion. **Jesus' reply to John the Baptist is, in fact, a summary of Jesus' ministry, leaving John to arrive at his own conclusion based on what is heard and seen.**

Echoing the words that the Old Testament prophet Isaiah used to describe the coming Messiah, words that John the Baptist would have been very familiar with, we learn by the time that we come to this 11th chapter in Matthew that Jesus has indeed given sight to the blind, mobility to the lame, cleansing for the lepers, hearing to the deaf, new life to the dead, and good news to the poor. In other words, **the person who would come as the Messiah would be a liberator.**

For many, however, Jesus just didn't fit their expectations of what the Messiah should be and do. And that includes John the Baptist. John has read his Bible, and he knows what to look for in a messiah. He knows the Old Testament prophetic promises, that "a fire will come out against all the house of Israel" (Ezek. 5:4) and "if any nation will not listen, then I will completely uproot it and destroy it, says the Lord" (Jer. 12:17). John himself had prophesied that the one who was coming would carry a "winnowing fork...in his hand" to separate the wheat from the chaff (Matt. 3:11-12). Yes, John the Baptist was a fire and brimstone kind of guy.

John looks and he listens, but he sees no fire, no uprooting and destruction, no separating of the wheat from the chaff. Every indication is that **John's wariness and doubt grow out of the fact that Jesus has not lived up to his expectations.** What Jesus did, then, was to make it necessary for people to redefine their definition of a messiah, even offering a word of guidance about how to read scripture.

Anyone who reads the Old Testament and finds it to be a book solely about God's wrath and vengeance is missing the overall point. To expect God to come only as a destroyer and not as a savior is to distort the essential message of the Old Testament, and worse, to misunderstand the nature and character of God. **Perhaps Jesus' greatest contribution to world religion, then, was to correct this misunderstanding of the nature and character of God – presenting a God who is now more clearly seen as one of love, forgiveness, and grace.**

We, too, then, must be careful not to insist that the messiah, the Christ, meet and match our expectations, but rather, represent God's expectations. For we tend to anticipate and expect what we want, and not necessarily what God offers. When we do that we sometimes miss the signs that would lead us to the freedom, transformation and liberation that God, as understood through Jesus, offers. As a result, far too many people, perhaps even some of us here today, sit in prisons far worse than the one that held John the Baptist. Sometimes we are locked in cells that prevent us from recognizing God's presence in and among our lives.

In order for us to recognize the work and ministry of Christ in our midst, we must hear and see the signs. For it is in these signs that we are confronted with evidence of God's presence. **It is possible to recognize the work of God today anytime you, I, or anyone else moves from despair to hope, from indifference to compassion, to understanding, to moving ahead in life, to knowledge, to new life and new beginnings, to wellness, and to emotional and spiritual wholeness.** If you ever "hear and see" these kinds of movement (and have not we all?), then you have experienced the presence of God. You have witnessed the work of Christ.

So John the Baptist's question is indeed the same question many of us are asking today. **Was Jesus really the one, or are we to wait for another?** In answering this all-important question, especially at this time of year when we are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, I offer the following for your consideration.

Through what we learn in scripture about Jesus, is he the one through whom you understand the nature and character of God? In other words, the decisive revelation of God, and your window or door to the divine? If so, does this understanding of God work to set you, and all people, free to become what God has created and called you to be? To put it another way, **does the life and ministry and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth represent to you the purposes of God,** thus becoming the visible representation of the invisible will of God, and therefore ushering in the realm of God in the here and now?

Speaking personally, since I answer "Yes" to these questions, I can affirm the vow I took at my ordination (a vow taken by all deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church), and which all people are asked to affirm when becoming a member of this denomination, **"Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior?"**

When I answer, with integrity, "Yes!" that's quite a different understanding than what traditional church orthodoxy dictates one must believe when making that claim. If making that claim has been a stumbling block for you to answer in the affirmative, thus keeping you from becoming a member of this congregation, then in all seriousness, we need to talk.

The answer Jesus himself gave to John the Baptist is indeed, therefore, the same answer for us today. **What do you hear and see?** Are the **signs of new life, transformation and liberation** breaking into our world of injustice and oppression? Are they breaking into the life of this congregation? Are they being experienced in your own life?

As you and I continue to prepare to celebrate the mystery and joy of Christmas Day, look at the evidence and come to your own conclusion. And like John the Baptist, we will have to respond on the basis of what we hear and see.

Amen.