

Sermon: "Are You the One?" Matthew 11: 1-11

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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JOHN AND JESUS

Last week we met John the Baptist. John seemed like a man who may have been wrong on occasion, but he never was in doubt. Speaking like the "hell fire and damnation" preachers of my youth he proclaimed to all, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand."

You'll remember that he was not a man to compromise with those in power as he castigated the hypocrisy of the religious leaders by saying, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

John was absolutely fearless, and according to the gospel of Matthew, this prophet had placed his stamp of approval on Jesus. When Jesus came to be baptized by John, the prophet protested saying, "I need to be baptized by you." John was present when, after the baptism of Jesus, the heavens were rolled back, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaimed,

"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Surely this was confirmation enough for the prophet that Jesus was indeed the one chosen by God. He was the Messiah. More than that, He was the Son of God.

DOUBT

But, in today's lesson we learn that even the most courageous prophet can have doubts. John had gotten into trouble with a powerful politician. He had the gall to tell King Herod that incest and adultery were definitely wrong according to the Scriptures. Kings have a way of inventing their own religion when they get an answer they don't want to hear. (Just ask King Henry the eighth!)

Then, as now, we you speak the unvarnished truth to the wrong person in power, it ends badly for the preacher. And so it was a cold December day in John's life. Soon he would face the executioner. They would have his head on a platter.

We might think that, as it often happens with many of us, when faced with his own mortality, the prophet's courage failed him. But, notice what our Scripture for today actually says.

John is not necessarily afraid of what might happen to him at the hands of Herod. It was the actions of Jesus himself that caused John to doubt. In verse two we read that when John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing he sent his disciples with the question. "Are you the one or should we expect another?"

Jesus was not what John expected.

THE PUZZLING ACTIONS OF JESUS

Remember how the Baptist talked about the coming Messiah in last week's lesson? In John's mind God's chosen would be an even stronger version of himself. John said,

"I baptize you with water, but he is going to baptize you with fire." John pictured the Messiah as one who would separate the wheat from the chaff, a judge who would distinguish between the righteous and the unrighteous in a terrible and permanent way.

But, what was Jesus doing? Jesus was bouncing babies on his knee and saying that you have to become like one of them to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said that even if you blow the family fortune on wine, women and song like the prodigal son, God is still waiting to take you back home.

Instead of condemning enemies Jesus said that the way of God was to love enemies. The actions of Jesus didn't seem to fit the picture of the fiery Messiah proclaimed by John.

A KINGDOM WITHOUT VENGEANCE

I think that a parallel reading from Luke 4:16-30 helps us understand what is going on in today's passage from Matthew. Luke 4 shows Jesus claiming a passage from Isaiah -- Isaiah 61 -- as his mission statement. But, Jesus makes an important change to the passage, though, eliminating one phrase -- "a day of vengeance for our God" -- from the Isaiah 61 passage, and substituting a clause from Isaiah 42:7 -- "the recovery of sight to the blind" -- instead. In other words, Jesus rejects bringing vengeance as part of his mission.

Sometimes when people talk about the last days and Jesus coming again in glory, they make him sound more like the Terminator than the Jesus revealed in Scripture. But, as John was disappointed at Jesus' lack of fire, I think that we will be equally disappointed if this is our image of the future Messiah.

The Jesus who comes again in glory and the Jesus who comes to us now is none other than the Jesus of Scripture. He is the Jesus who was a humble servant to the poor, the outcast and the sinner. He is the Jesus who is no respecter of persons, eating with tax collectors and prostitutes as well as religious and political leaders.

And finally, and most importantly, Jesus was willing to die on a Roman cross rather than retaliate against an enemy who had treated him and his people so brutally.

The question and doubt of John anticipates the question that would be asked of Jesus down through the ages. How could salvation come by way of a cross? How could the power of God be displayed in such weakness?

JESUS THE UNDERACHIEVER

Woody Allen once said toward the end of one of his movies, "I don't hate God. No, I think the worst thing you can say about God is that he is an underachiever." Perhaps this is why John asked the question of Jesus. Jesus seemed like such an underachiever compared to the role that John would have him play. We don't expect a crucified Messiah.

I can't blame John for asking the question, for doubting that Jesus was really the one who was to come. People still doubt, still wonder if the kingdom of God could really come in such an unusual and unexpected way.

When people understand the radical nature of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, it is only natural to ask John's question, "Can this really be the One for whom we wait? Isn't there another who would fit in better with what we want in a Messiah? Isn't there one who could achieve more of my goals and give me what I want?"

Just as Jesus did not conform to John's expectations so Jesus does not conform to our expectations either. Jesus does not come to give us what we want. Jesus comes to reveal God's expectations of us, and it is the actions of Jesus define those expectations.

It is truly a world turned upside down, a kingdom where (as Jesus put it) "... 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."

In other words, the actions of Jesus proclaim a kingdom that rises from the bottom up. Those who are weakest are given help first. Those who are devalued by society are given first priority. Those that we think are hopeless are given hope and new life.

Jesus then pronounces what some have called the neglected beatitude. Jesus said, "Blessed is he who takes no offense at me." The Greek word translated "take offense" is the word skandalizo from which we get the word scandal. It can also be translated "to trip up."

John is scandalized or tripped up by what Jesus is doing and saying.

Jesus is God's gift of love to the world, but it is a gift that no one understands or wants. It is a grace that no one recognizes.

THE UNWANTED GIFT

A popular writer told of something that happened to him as a teenager. He wrote, "I remember the sudden appearance under my family's Christmas tree of the largest present I had ever hoped to see. It stood at least a foot taller than I and was twice as heavy; and wonder of wonders; it had my name on it.

For two whole weeks before Christmas this present towered above all others, and it defied any conventional attempts to learn of its contents before its time."

During the weeks leading up to Christmas he could think of nothing else but his present under the tree. He imagined all sorts of terrific presents. On Christmas day the family gathered together and the main attraction was the opening of this huge present.

He was excited about opening the present, but he also had a vague sense of disappointment. The great mystery was about to end, and he would no longer be able to dream about what it could be.

His present turned out to be a beautiful handmade desk his uncle had built, but he was not pleased. He wrote, "By this time, nothing in this world could have lived up to my expectations." It was a great gift, but he could not receive it because it was a gift he did not expect.

According to the Bible, this is exactly what happened when God gave the world the gift of his Son, Jesus. In the gospel of John we read, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. [11] He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." John 1:10-11 (NRSV)

The people could not accept Jesus because he was not what they expected.

The Christmas message is still a stumbling block for those who really hear it. God does not come to us in the form of a powerful political or military leader. God does not come to us in the bustle of the mall or the revelry of many parties. God does not come to us through a Christmas bonus or even the warmth of gathered family.

God comes to us in the gentle cry of a poor woman's child.
God comes to us in unexpected and out of the way places.

This past week a member was doing research on the town of Nazareth for a Bible study. He wanted to know why Nathaniel asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" I wasn't entirely sure so we looked it up. The reason Nazareth was so despised? It was a small place in the middle of nowhere. The town and its people were deemed to be insignificant.

And yet something good did come out of Nazareth. You would not expect the Son of God to come from a place like Yee Haw Junction or Holopaw, but that's exactly what happened. And maybe the Spirit of Jesus can be found in places like that even today. Maybe the Spirit of Christ can even come into our small, insignificant work-a-day place.

A TREE IN THE DESERT

Charles Kuralt, in his travels across the United States, found what looked like a Christmas tree growing in the most unlikely place, above the tree line in the Rockies. He noted that trees need good soil and good weather and up on top of those mountains there's no soil and terrible weather. Nothing can live beyond a certain height on these mountains, and certainly not trees.

And that's why the tree was for those who knew a kind of miracle. On a barren stretch of US 50 without another tree in sight that juniper tree was growing. Nobody remembered who put the first Christmas ornament on it. It was probably some whimsical motorist many years ago. But, each year by Christmas day the tree had become a Christmas tree.

The tree that had no business growing at all survived against all odds.
The people who live in the area know and love the tree.

Kuralt said,
"Just looking at the tree makes you think how unexpected life on earth can be. The tree is so lonely and so brave that it seems to offer courage to those who pass it and a message. It is the Christmas message that there is life and hope even in a rough world."

That is indeed the Christmas message. Its signs are unexpected and even unnoticed by many. But, it is the hope of which Isaiah wrote when he predicted,

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad.

The desert shall rejoice and blossom.”

Each year during the holiday season I think about those of us who feel all alone in a wilderness of despair. I think about those of us who are in that dry desert, a place where what we need seems so far away.

Each year the dark night of the soul threatens to overwhelm many of us.

The message of Christmas is a message of hope for times like that. It is a hope that blossoms in the most unlikely of places and is proclaimed by the most unlikely of characters.

Even in the wilderness we are not alone.
Even in the desert water flows.
Even in the darkest night the light can shine.

REPAIRING BROKEN DREAMS

In the May 1982 issue of Guideposts magazine, Norman Vincent Peale told of a woman who came to him for help. Her husband had been killed in a tragic car accident and as a result she felt hopeless and broken.

Peale was able to help her by telling her a true story about a distinguished violinist by the name of Peter Cropper. Cropper's works was so outstanding that the Royal Academy of Music in London had honored him by lending him a priceless 258-year-old Stradivarius.

It is the dream of every musician to play such an instrument.
But, a terrible thing happened while Cropper was performing in Finland. He tripped and fell on top of the Stradivarius and broke it.

His dream had turned into a nightmare. He was inconsolable.

But a London violin dealer told him a master craftsman who could repair the venerable instrument. To make a long story short, the repairs were so perfect they could not even be seen, and the soaring notes of the instrument were more beautiful than they ever had been before, all because the broken parts were placed in the hands of a master craftsman who then applied his healing touch.

I am sure Peter Cropper found it hard to believe that a repair could be so good; that the broken violin was even better than it was before

the accident. He thought it was beyond repair.

And in the same way, some of us might be tempted to think that our broken lives can never be mended. But, when we put our broken lives in the hands of a master craftsman, we find that new life is possible, that flowers can bloom in the desert.

Like John we often come to Jesus with broken dreams and unfulfilled expectations asking, "Are you the one? Or should we look for another?"

Jesus replies, "Look at the lives of those whom I have touched. People have been healed. The sorrowful have been comforted. I have brought joy and hope in the middle of despair. It can and will happen again. I am the one. The kingdom of God is at hand."

Amen.

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