



“What Do You See?”
Scripture – Matthew 11:2-11
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, December 15, 2019

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Oh, John the Baptist. He has never been one to beat about the bush. Like the prophets of old — the prophets we heard from throughout the fall — John calls it like he sees it. And this occasion is no different. Even when entrusting the errand to his disciples, John asks bluntly: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Despite John’s reputation for plain speech, it is interesting that Matthew should place this question on the lips of the Baptizer. For John has already acknowledged the greatness of this Jesus. Earlier in the Gospel, when John was baptizing at the River Jordan, he announced: “[O]ne who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals” (Matt 3:11). And moments later, when Jesus presented himself for baptism, John tried to refuse: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt 3:14). It seemed, then, that John the Baptist had a pretty clear understanding of who this Jesus was.

But, now, John wonders.

It’s possible, of course, that Matthew creates this exchange to give Jesus the prompt he needs to define his ministry ... that John’s question is a rhetorical pass setting up Jesus’ declarative slam dunk.

Or, maybe, doubt has set in. John’s circumstances have changed, after all. He no longer stands on the banks of the Jordan, proclaiming, “Prepare the way of the Lord!” The one sent as a voice crying out in the wilderness now languishes in prison, where he must rely on reports from his followers about what the Lord is up to in the world. John no longer surveys the vast expanse of the Judean desert; he now stares at the dank walls of a dark cell. From this vantage point, the world looks pretty bleak. Perhaps John really has started to wonder whether Jesus is the One.

So John asks the blunt question — the question that, no doubt, is on the minds of many in Israel. For this Jesus has not come in the way they expected of a Messiah. He has not come “with vengeance, with terrible recompense” as Isaiah foretold (Isa 35:4). He has not come with a winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff, as John, himself, prophesied (Matt 3:12). This Jesus has not come with sword in hand to slay the legions, to ride in on a white steed and rescue his people from the clutches of Rome.

In so many ways, the carpenter’s boy from Nazareth does not conform to the people’s vision of a Messiah. By sending his disciples, John is almost certainly giving voice to the whole community’s skepticism.

John the Baptist was never one to beat about the bush: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

In asking this question of Jesus, John invites — no, *forces* — the rest of us to ponder it as well. It really is a poignant question, you know, especially in this season of Advent when Christians wait with expectant hope for the One who has *already* come. At this time of year, the church unequivocally proclaims that the Prince of Peace draws near to rule with justice and righteousness. Yet, when we look around, we see precious little evidence of God’s reign breaking in upon our world.

What we see, instead, is a world groaning for redemption: We see ice caps melting and sea-levels rising and coastal communities wondering when *their* town will be the one washed away. We see sisters and brothers across the globe fleeing their homes because bombs are falling or gangs are knocking or their crops have turned to dust for lack of rain. We see a nation so divided that the bold experiment of democracy threatens to implode. We see the news reports: Shootings at a naval base, knife attacks on London Bridge, an opioid epidemic that ravages communities. And on the home front, we see families huddled around hospital beds and friends grieving in living rooms that are far too empty. Unfortunately, I could go on.

Yes, from most vantage points, the world looks pretty bleak. If we rely solely on what our eyes can see, then it appears the Light of the World is nothing more than a faint and flickering flame that the darkness will easily overcome.

Anglican Priest Tish Harrison Warren writes that Advent is the time when we “lean into an almost cosmic ache: our deep, wordless desire for things to be made right and the incompleteness we find in the meantime.”¹ For this is the season when people of faith live in between: in between memory and hope, in between past and future ... In between the time when Christ dwelled among us as bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh and the time when Christ will come again to make all things new.

For now, we wait. And it can be easy to wonder, as we look upon our weary world, if we wait in vain. Perhaps we even find ourselves echoing John’s question: “Is Jesus really the one, or — at this point — should we just look for another?”

I love the way Jesus responds when John’s disciples come knocking: “Go and tell John what you hear and see.” It’s so typical of Jesus, isn’t it? He can never just say, “Yes” or “No” — not even when the question is as straightforward as this one. “Go and tell John what you hear and see,” he says. “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.” *Go and tell John what you hear and see.*

Jesus does not respond, “Yes, I am the Messiah for whom you have been waiting.” Instead he describes what happens when the Messiah comes into the world: When the Messiah comes the paralytic hears: “Stand up, take your bed and go to your home,” and — that very instant — he gets up from his mat and walks (Matt 9:2-8). When the Messiah comes the grieving father watches his daughter rise from her deathbed and return to her family’s embrace (Matt 9:18-26). When the Messiah comes the demoniacs are released from torment (Matt 8:28-34), the eyes of the blind are opened (Matt 9:27-31), and the poor learn that the kingdom of heaven belongs to them (Matt 5:1-11). Jesus does not answer, “Yes, your waiting is over.” He merely describes what he’s been up to since the day he was baptized by John. And it is the work of one anointed to usher in God’s reign.

¹ Tish Harrison Warren, “Want to Get Into the Christmas Spirit? Face the Darkness: How I fell in love with the season of Advent, *The New York Times*, 30 November 2019 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/30/opinion/sunday/christmas-season-advent-celebration.html?fbclid=IwAR3otTkZbgKwBgXW10EZnT4jXDYV3nzX-Z3JP9OnApMTvmWd6DwQZF5UeFc>).

This is what happens when the Messiah comes: The world begins to turn toward wholeness — not, perhaps, in one cosmic shift that topples every power that binds, but in incremental turns: A long-suffering woman healed, a captive man released, a child restored to life. And with every glimpse of a world made right, with every sign of new life, God’s reign becomes more and more evident in our midst.

It’s happening, Jesus points out. *The kingdom of God is breaking in upon our world*. “Go and tell John what you hear and see.” Go and tell what you hear and see.

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (yes, we have one of those) states that one of the great ends of the church is “the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”² ...The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. Which means that, even as we lean into that cosmic ache for things to be made right, we are called to testify to glimmers of God’s reign breaking in upon our world.

It’s as if Jesus — having sent John’s disciples back to tell what they have heard and seen — now turns to us: What do *you* see? It would be tempting to respond, “Well, Jesus, this is what I *don’t* see. I *don’t* see paralytics rising from their mats and skipping home. I *don’t* see little girls leaping from their deathbeds with fresh breath in their lungs. I *don’t* see the blind opening their eyes to behold the world for the first time ... at least not the way they did when you walked the earth.”

And I can just hear Jesus retort: “Look again. I have called you to be people of hope, people of joy. Look again. What do you see?”

“Ok, right now this is what I see: I see 120 struggling families who, thanks to our Christmas Box Project, will have a special meal and gifts to unwrap on Christmas day. I see Guatemalan women, who are accustomed to cooking meals over open flame, receive stoves that will reduce the risk of illness and injury because this church cares about our sisters in Christ. I see a congregation that gives generously every Christmas Eve to support partners in mission who provide shelter to those experiencing homelessness, who offer recovery services to those struggling with addiction, who strive for racial reconciliation in our city.

“When I look with the eyes of faith, this is what I see: glimmers of God’s reign breaking in upon our world.” No, these fleeting signs don’t look like the miracles performed when the Messiah came among us as flesh and bone. But, still, there are glimpses of healing, of liberation, of restoration ... glimpses of a world made right. And we’re just talking about one community of faith, one congregation that is helping to nudge the world toward wholeness. And there are so many more who are striving to be an exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

One of my preaching professors, K.C. Ptomey, once told a story that illuminates this point for me.³ It was a story about the congregation he served before joining the seminary faculty: His congregation had completed a house with Habitat for Humanity. And, on a hot September day, they gathered on the freshly-sodded lawn with the family that would be living in that home. The pastor from the family’s church was there ... members of the choir as well. The choir led the gathered people in an uplifting spiritual, and their pastor offered a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving. It was all very moving.

Now standing beside K.C. was a man by the name of Steve. Steve had been a member of K.C.’s church for a number of years, though he rarely attended worship. Steve was a gifted carpenter. At one time in his life, he had been a contractor, and — then — he became the CEO of a large, heavy equipment company. But — before all

² The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), F-1.0304.

³ K.C. Ptomey, “A Homily on Revelation 7 and Acts 9,” 27 April 2010 (http://www.austinseminary.edu/cf_media/index.cfm?t=1&g=253#player)

that — when Steve was fresh out of college, he'd been drafted by the Green Bay Packers and had played wide receiver for a number of years. "He must be 8-foot-tall," K.C. said. "... [Steve] is a big, ole tough guy with big biceps ... he's what you might call a 'man's man.'"

Well, after the preliminaries were over, the preacher from this other church invited those gathered on the lawn to pray. And Steve took off his baseball cap and bowed his head, but he left on his designer sunglasses. The pastor offered a marvelous prayer; as K.C. described it, he "dusted the stars." And when he finished, the faithful who were gathered sealed his prayer with a loud, "Amen!" At that point K.C. looked over at Steve, and there were tears running out from under his designer sunglasses. And Steve turned to K.C. and he said, "Preacher, did you see it? Did you see it? Preacher — There's something bigger than a house going on here."

Yes, praise God — there are moments when we just know there is something bigger going on. Do you see it? The reign of God breaking in upon our world? Do you see it?

People of Faith — Open your eyes to glimmers of grace in the gloom, to signs of the kingdom dawning in the darkness ... And go and tell the world what you see.

Advent Joy – Gregory Knox Jones

Sculptor of this unfathomable cosmos, painter and composer of all that is beautiful, as we move ever closer to the glorious celebration of Christmas, we light candles to mark the path of Advent. On this third Sunday, we pray that you will arouse our memories to things that bring us joy –

- the beauty of your majestic creation...
- the echo of children laughing...
- family or friends gathered around the table for a sumptuous meal...
- the sight and sound of a geese flyover...
- a second chance after we have damaged something precious...
- the kind gesture of a person we have never seen before...
- discovering something new and illuminating...
- a loving touch by someone dear to us...
- a good soul who patiently listens when we need to unburden our heart...
- a chance to make a difference in someone's life...

God, during this season of Advent, as we raise our awareness of you coming into our lives, as we remember your love for the world in the birth of Jesus, and as we respond to your call to be kind and gracious and generous, we give thanks for those moments when the hungry are able to feast, when the ill are restored to health, when the oppressed have their chains of bondage snapped, when people in despair begin to dance again, when people who are lonely have a full schedule of visitors, when people who grieve the loss of their loved one catch a glimpse of your eternal realm, when adversaries put their bitter feelings behind them and embrace, when people who are stumbling around aimlessly hear a cause calling their name.

Mighty God, as Christ came into the world centuries ago, we pray that he will break into our lives again and again, to shake us from our drowsiness and to stir us from our lethargy so that we will awaken to your constant presence in our midst and to see that a rich life awaits us if we choose to live in harmony with your will.

Gracious God, there is too much in our world that is dark and divisive. During these cold days of Advent, may we train our eyes to spot the moments of joy that appear and may we stop long enough to savor them.

We pray in the name of the one who taught us to pray together, saying, "**Our Father...**"