

Advent 3A 2016 Sermon

Matthew 11:2-11

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴ Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." ⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' ¹¹ 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.

Those of you who have been in my Adult Classes through the years have heard me say that the Hebrew language of the Bible does not have comparative and superlative adjectives like we do in English. Instead, the Hebrew language uses repetition. So instead of saying, "big, bigger, and biggest," as we do in English, someone speaking Biblical Hebrew would say, "big, big big, and big big big." In the Psalms, we often see repetitive phrases when the psalmist wants to emphasize something: "...my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning." (Psalm 130:6) And when Jesus says, "Truly, truly I say to you," his repetition of that word "truly" means that he **really** wants to emphasize what he is about to say. At the end of John's Gospel, Jesus famously asks Peter the same question three times: Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? (21:15-17)

So when Jesus, in today's Gospel, asks the crowd the same question **three** times, we should pay attention.

Jesus asks the crowds, "When you went out to John the Baptist in the desert, what were you looking for?" (v. 7) Then again he asks,

"What were you looking for?" (v. 8) And yet again,

"What were you looking for?" (v.9)

That question permeates today's Gospel story.

For it is, in fact, in a slightly different form, John the Baptist's question, also. John, in prison, sends his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one I have been looking for?" (v. 3) It seems a strange question to come from John the Baptist,

considering that in last week's Gospel reading, John was out in the wilderness preaching with the utmost **confidence** about this very person, Jesus. (Matt. 3:1-12) If we read just a few verses *after* last week's Gospel passage, John the Baptist says to Jesus, who comes to be baptized by John, "**I'm** the one who needs to be baptized by *you!*" And then the heavens are opened and John hears a voice from heaven say, "This is my son, the Beloved..." (Matt. 3:14)

So what happened between the time John heard that heavenly voice and now, when John is having second thoughts as to whether Jesus really is the promised Messiah? What happened in the meantime?

The only logical answer I can think of is that Jesus is not doing what John had *expected* the coming Messiah to do. And what had John expected? Well, in preaching to the crowds in last week's Gospel, John had this to say about the coming Messiah: "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." (Matthew 3:12) But Jesus has **not** come wielding a winnowing fork, separating the wheat from the chaff and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. Father John Shea comments, "John [the Baptist]'s vision of what was to come emphasized judgment, punishment, and vindication. What he is hearing about Jesus does **not** fit these expectations."¹ The *lack* of judgment, punishment, and vindication in the life and ministry of Jesus disillusioned John, and causes him to question whether Jesus is truly the Messiah.

So *why* doesn't Jesus just come right out and tell John, "Yes, I **am** the longed-for Messiah."?

I have to think it is because Jesus knew that what John needed was not some perfunctory answer to his question, but rather an inner transformation of his expectations of the Messiah and the Kingdom which the Messiah was revealing and manifesting. So what Jesus instructs John's disciples to tell John is in essence a description of the kingdom of God which is being powerfully revealed in Jesus' works: a kingdom not characterized by judgment and punishment and vindication, but by healing and restoration and wholeness. "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."

"Jesus is restoring creation, undoing the effects of Adam's fall [in the Garden of Eden]," writes Fr. Shea. "He is reconnecting people with God, and the symbolic result is a whole human person.

"This activity may **not** be what John is looking for. It does not have the edge of judgment that John's preaching pushed. Jesus may be an offense to the fierce apocalyptic mindset."²

“What are you looking for?” It is the kind of question spiritual teachers asks their students, leading those students to plunge the depths of their souls and discern the deepest desires of their hearts. Leading each student to ask, “What *am* I looking for?”

“Looking into the heart to see what drives us is not an easy task,” writes Fr. Shea. “Finding the root desire is a journey of discovery. A guide is helpful and, in this text, Jesus is the guide. One of the duties of the guide is to push the question and not allow us to settle for surface answers.”³ **This** is why Jesus does not answer John’s question, but rather invites John to interpret the meaning of the signs of healing and restoration and wholeness that Jesus is bringing about.

“What are you looking for?” Jesus asks. “What **is** the deepest desire of your heart?”

Jesus knows that it is a *difficult* question for John, for the crowd, *and* for us, since so very often we are totally out of touch with the deepest yearnings of our own heart. So we succumb to our *culture’s* answers, and convince ourselves that the desires of our *culture* – for comfort, status, material things, revenge, entertainment, power, easy answers, the security of being *inside* your group and demonizing those *outside* your group – we convince ourselves that these values of our culture are the deepest desire of our heart. Jesus knows that we **must** plumb the depths of our own soul, so he continues to press the question. “What are you looking for? Are you looking for whatever passing fad or belief is popular today but changes tomorrow, like a reed shaking in the wind? (v. 8) What are you looking for? Are you looking for comfort, security, status, power, or wealth, like someone dressed in soft robes? (v. 9) What are you looking for?” Jesus asks the third time. “Are you looking for a prophet?” And *then* he answers his own question: “Yes! You are looking for a prophet.” For the prophet speaks the truth of the soul and names the Reality of God, no matter what the current trends in religion, politics, or belief. And in the end, **that** is the only thing that will satisfy our deepest longings: the truth of who God is, Divine Love embodied in this very person of Jesus, God’s Messiah, and in the works of healing, restoration, and making whole – the works of the kingdom of Heaven which Jesus enacts.

John’s message of repentance, important as it is (as I explained in last week’s sermon), only brings us to the *threshold* of the kingdom of God; repentance alone does not bring us into the Kingdom. For those “born of women,” those who live out their lives only in the context of the values of this world, judgment, punishment, and vindication are seen as evidence of God’s activity. Anyone like Jesus who does **not** act from a place of judgment, punishment, and vindication does not meet the expectations of a Messiah held by those “born of women” – like John the Baptist. **That** is why John doubts that Jesus is the Messiah: the kingdom of heaven which Jesus is revealing is not what John is looking for. That is why Jesus says, “The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.”

My friends, you and I are so often NOT in touch with what our own soul is looking for – not in touch with the deepest desire of our own heart. So we, too, are very susceptible to living out our lives in the kingdom of this world’s values, the world of winnowing forks and eternally burning chaff. We are so very susceptible to thinking that dividing, judging, and punishing are, in fact, the deepest desires of our own heart. So we must continually ask ourselves Jesus’ question, “What am I looking for? What am I looking for? What am I looking for?” in order to plumb the depths of our soul, where the seed of the kingdom of God is planted, and is beginning to grow. And it is from **that** place, in the depths of our soul, that we can see clearly that the kingdom of Heaven and its Messiah is revealed **not** when there is judgment, punishment, and vindication, but rather when “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, ... the poor have good news brought to them,” and wholeness is restored to humanity and the world.

One more thing: Jesus’ answer to John – recounting his works of mercy as evidence of the in-breaking Kingdom of heaven – “is also a call to action, a call... to all of us. [For it] both reminds us of God’s promises of healing and peace, *and* empowers us to work for them in the meantime.”⁴ Because Christ’s coming brings healing, peace, justice, and wholeness, we act **now** to make our lives, our church, our families, our community, our country and world more healthy, peaceful, just, and whole. Because we believe that Christ has come, and with him the inbreaking kingdom of heaven, we work **now** *for* that kingdom: for the very kind of world Jesus describes and wants us to live in, where 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.

Is that the understanding of God’s Messiah and the kingdom of heaven that **you** hold to?

In this holy season of expectancy, what are you looking for?

What are you looking for?

What are you looking for?

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 37

² *ibid.* p. 38

³ *ibid.* p. 38

⁴ David Lose, “Dear Partner in Preaching,”

<http://www.davidlose.net/2016/12/advent-3-a-johns-blue-christmas/>