

December 15, 2019
Third Sunday of Advent

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Are We to Wait for Another

Matthew 11:2-6

Notice how the text begins. John is in prison. This is the John when Elizabeth, his mother, meets Mary, Jesus' mother, jumps in Elizabeth's womb, as if to say even in their mothers' wombs, John and Jesus were already on the "same page."

This is the John whose father, Zechariah, comes out of the sanctuary looking like he had seen a ghost, and not able to speak. John's father, Zechariah is a priest. He is in the sanctuary offering incense. Suddenly on the right side of the altar of incense an angel appears, and tells Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth will have a child. Zechariah doesn't believe him. Gabriel, the angel, doesn't like that Zechariah talks back to him, makes him mute. When he comes out of the sanctuary everyone asks him, "what happened in there Zechariah, speak to us?"

This is the John who lived in the wilderness, eating wild honey and locusts, and who calls the Pharisees, "a brood of vipers".

And this is the outspoken John who accuses the king publicly, "you cannot be with your brother's wife" and ends up in prison, which brings us up to date with today's text...

"When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'"

In the gospel of John, (a different John, not John the Baptist) when John the Baptist first appears and sees Jesus, without any introduction, says with great conviction, "behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

John BECOMES the chief witness to Jesus as Israel's Messiah, as John's gospel suggests, but here in this text John is still asking questions. Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?

In Christian faith this is the fundamental question, "are you the one or are we to wait for another"? If the one who composed Matthew's gospel did not believe Jesus was Israel's Messiah, he would have stopped writing here. The first verse of our text says, "when John heard in prison what the messiah was doing,"—is it John who declares Jesus to be Messiah, or is it the writer of Matthew? It is the writer of Matthew's gospel who makes this witness. John was not convinced and was still inquiring. In all four gospels it is the gospel writers' intention to declare, persuade, and argue that Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's Messiah. It is Matthew who writes the first sentence of our text.

How important is this for our faith today. Is the answer to this question the heartbeat of our faith? Yes, but we equivocate on this. I equivocate. It continues to be the question we ask even in a mature faith. Who was he? In our life in Christ, I believe, we can let John give us freedom to ask this question. Yet also, if there isn't something that burns within us, even in our equivocation, that he is the Messiah, or as the earliest followers said, "He is Lord," would we not, do we not lose the vision and sacrifice necessary to follow, to hold out this witness that in Christ we are changed, that we begin to think in different ways about the world, and what we are called to do. It is a very critical question in our life in Christ, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another." Do you still ask that question? It is a very important life-long faith question.

I served a one-year seminary internship in San Francisco. The congregation had a coffee house outreach in the Haight Ashbury neighborhood. Many of the folks visiting the coffeehouse had drug and alcohol issues. One young man, perhaps damaged by drug use, had become a believer and was participating in the life of the church. He was soft-spoken, not quick to speak, but one day, out of nowhere, he said to me, "you know, Jim, it says that no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." That was the best spiritual learning I had that year. Faith is not all evidence based. But something happens that leads us to believe. If we don't allow ourselves to continue to ask this question, our faith is tamed and of little interest to others, especially children and youth.

So Jesus gives an answer. Tell John, and these are Matthew's criteria for being Israel's Messiah, tell John, "what you hear and see, blind receive sight, lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them." These are the miracles of Jesus from chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew. This is Jesus' answer to John and to us in Matthew's gospel. From the prophecy of Isaiah, the blind, lame, sick, the deaf and poor have good news preached to them. It is these, Matthew says, that make Jesus, Messiah of Israel. These are the criteria and foundation of faith in Jesus as Israel's Messiah.

Much of Christian belief about Jesus is that he is the Son of God. That indeed is the witness, especially in the Gospel of John. But I recommend to you these works of our Lord, Matthew's argument, that Jesus is Messiah, the Christ of God all from the prophecy of Isaiah. And what the Lord did and does as God's Messiah shapes and informs our ministry as a church, and gives us clarity to what Jesus is doing and calls us to do. "Are you the one who is to come, yes, and these are the reasons." So when thinking of the ministry of the church should we not allow these works of the Lord to inform and guide our thinking as we plan and envision our mission.

Now the text ends with a peculiar statement from the Lord, "blessed is anyone who take no offense at me." Who does he mean? Is John being offensive in his response? I don't think so. Is it the Pharisees and spiritual leaders of Israel, perhaps.

What Jesus is certainly saying is that there will be opposition to my Messiahship. The word, "offence" is translated from a Greek word that suggests, scandal, or to be scandalized. In other words, Jesus is saying "don't allow my work, my miracles and the claim this makes to Messiahship to 'scandalize' you, to upset you, as something unthinkable. That causes you to recoil and walk away indignant and insulted."

I think this suggests that there needs to be an edge to our Christian witness, rejected at first, but seen to be true as the Lord works. Scandal. Usually a negative term, but can what is most

life-giving scandalize at first? That the Israel's Messiah would die on a gentile cross was a scandal... Paul says, "Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and just plain foolishness to Gentiles." When Jesus says to the rich man, "give all your money to the poor and come and follow me," that is scandalous. Can you imagine talk in the rest of the family about this.

So this is the question on this Sunday of Advent, "are you the one who is to come," or are we to wait for another. The answer of course has implications for our Christmas celebration, for if it is the Messiah's birth we celebrate, if Jesus is the one as Matthew and all the gospels and the entire NT text argues, and add to that the work of the Holy Spirit, then everything has changed, including us, and the mission of the church, even the world. Let Jesus be the Messiah of Israel in our life and family in fresh, contemporary ways. And let us trust, and not be timid to ask "are you the one who is to come, or do we wait for another" as a question which will renew and deepen faith.