

3 Advent, Year A: 12 December 2010

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

Why is John asking about this now?

After all, he is the one who baptized Jesus in the River Jordan.

After all, he saw the heavens open and heard the voice from heaven calling Jesus "The Beloved."

Why now?

Well, let's look at the beginning of the passage for the answer.

The evangelist writes, "When John heard what the Messiah was doing...."

In fact what he could have written is,

"When John heard what the Messiah was *not* doing."

Because the Messiah was definitely not taking his advice.

John had told the people that the ax was lying at the root ready to chop down the unworthy trees.

He had promised them that the chaff would burn with unquenchable fire.

And here was Jesus - hanging out with the very people

who were supposed to be chopped and burned,

eating with tax collectors, letting prostitutes wash his feet,

pronouncing forgiveness to Samaritans,

and all the while the Roman oppressors remained in power.

This wasn't in the script at all.

I heard a story about a college student who came to his religion professor and said,

"You know I used to be OK with that 'What Would Jesus Do?' thing

until I started really reading the Bible.

Sometimes Jesus did some pretty strange things."

Sometimes he did, certainly by conventional standards, the way the world sees things.

And because of that John asks and the disciples ask and we may sometimes ask:

Are you the one to come or are we to wait for another?

Each of us has expectations about the kind of Messiah we want:

Some of us want a first-century hell-raiser –

breathing fire and brimstone, scaring the heaven into people.

Or maybe an ideological Jesus who will champion our favorite cause,

who will assure us that God is for gun control or against abortion?

Or maybe a Good Shepherd Jesus who will not demand anything of us,

but will assure us that he loves us.

Sooner or later all of our ideas about Jesus will find themselves out of synch with reports of what he is doing either in the Scripture or in the world.

And we ask: Are you the one to come or are we to wait for another?

This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.

Jesus - the real Jesus - at times upsets our expectations;
he breaks out of whatever box we put him in.
Then it's time for us to ask ourselves if we want to follow the living Christ
or simply our idea of who the Christ should be.

Advent is the time to get out of our heads
and let go of our notions about "What Jesus *Would Do*?"
and look at what Jesus *is* doing.
If we do not, we will simply create a Christ in our image and worship ourselves.

Advent is the time to let go of those preconceptions of who the Messiah should be
and enter the deep December dark.

Advent is the beginning of the church year because we start all over.
We leave our scripts of everything we know and begin the journey toward Bethlehem.
Like Mary and Joseph, we stop thinking about some ideal life
and look instead at where we are.

No, I didn't expect to be unmarried and pregnant.
No, I didn't expect to be have all those people whisper behind my back.
But here I am God, your handmaid, your servant; show us the way.

Like Mary and Joseph, now is the time to leave the familiar country of the old
and begin the journey into the dark of newness.
We leave our assumptions behind;
we leave behind the ways we have put God in a box.
We look for God in new ways –
not the idea of God, but the experience of God.

Remember how the evangelist has Jesus respond to John's disciples:
"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."

Note what he *doesn't* say:
"Tell John that I am the fulfillment of the Messianic promises of the Old Testament,
as it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah, whom I have just quoted."
Rather, Jesus essentially says,
"Go back and tell John that in my name,
the hurting people of the world are being totally transformed."

In other words: Wake UP.
Instead of thinking about the *idea* of the Messiah,
look and see what the Messiah is doing all around you and in your life.
Stop thinking of God outside yourself - outside your life;
look for the Divine Presence right where you are.

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We can play the John the Baptist game all our lives.
We can just keep asking, "Are you the one to come or are we to wait for another?"
But one day we must realize that Jesus is not a concept
or a theory to be confirmed or disproved.
Jesus is the bringer of life - abundant life - eternal life –
and he is bringing life to us right now.

So often we think of Christmas as a religious history lesson.
We are interested in how the world worked 2000 years ago.
What exactly was the census, and what were the marriage customs?
And who were the magi?

All of that is informative, but none of it gets to the real point, which is:
Do you experience God being born in your life?
Jesus says to us what he says to John:
"I did not come for titles - I came to bring life.
Do not ask me who I am - look at the life I am stirring inside of you."

The birth of Christ is now and here.
Jesus is always being born and because of that
people we know - people like us - are being transformed.
Jesus says to John's disciples:
"Don't look at me; what do you see in yourself or in your world?
What do you hear?
Part of you was blind; now can you see?
Part of you was lame; now can you walk?
Part of you was dead inside; now can you feel new life?"

That's how they know he is the One.
And that's how we know he is the One.
Advent is the stirring of the divine life in us and in our world.
Advent is the time for us to leave our safe houses and experience that stirring first hand.

In Walt Whitman's poem "Song of Myself"
the speaker says farewell to his readers with these lines:

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.
You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good help to you nevertheless
And filter and fiber your blood.
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop some where waiting for you.

The place Jesus stops for you is in your life on this day.
Let us pray.

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Gracious God, you have promised
that the Word will become flesh and dwell among us.
Help us to let go of our preconceptions
so that we might open our hearts and minds and souls to receive you.
Give us eyes to see your presence in our world and our lives
so that through ordinary people like us, your kingdom might draw near.
Amen.

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