

Sermon: Are You the One?

12/13/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

As John the Baptist sat there, in a dark, damp jail cell, he began to wonder. You see, since walking out of the wilderness, wearing clothes made of camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey, he had devoted his life to preparing the way of the Lord. His fire and brimstone preaching had convinced people throughout Judea that they must repent and be baptized. He had even baptized Jesus and watched in awe as the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove. For years, John's faith and calling had given him the strength and courage to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and that the kingdom of heaven has come near. But as he sat in that dark, damp jail cell, doubt began to creep in. Why hadn't Jesus started the revolution that would restore the Promised Land to the Israelites and usher in the kingdom of heaven? I mean, true, there were miraculous stories of him and his rag-tag bunch of disciples going out and healing people and casting out demons. But where was the Lord who everyone was expecting, the Lord who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and unquenchable fire? The Lord who we heard John testify to in our Gospel lesson for last week?

Now, no one knows exactly how John got the question to his followers. After all, I highly doubt that he had visiting hours after publicly rebuking King Herod for marrying his half-niece and former sister-in-law. But John did pass the message along, and eventually his question was relayed to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Now, Jesus could have answered with a simple "yes" or "no," and I imagine that John would have appreciated such a direct response, given the circumstances and all. But that day there was more that Jesus wanted to teach him, so he instructed John's followers to "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.” It’s as if Jesus was saying, “Remember those miraculous stories that you were so quick to dismiss just a short while ago, when the going got tough and you grew tired of waiting? Well, the prophet Isaiah foretold that the Lord would one day perform these miracles, and see what I have done. See how I have fulfilled the Scriptures, Scriptures that you know all-too-well. Have faith. There’s no need to doubt.”

But for many of those following Jesus, reason for doubt remained. After all, even after all of these miracles, there were still blind and lame people living in Israel. Not every leper had been cleansed, nor had all of the dead been raised. Yes, the poor had heard the good news, but they were still impoverished and struggling under Roman taxation. And what of Pilate and Herod? I mean, Herod was still minting and frivolously spending coins with his picture on them, like any good first-century king would, and Pilate was robbing the Temple treasury and having his soldiers break the kneecaps of anyone who protested. Surely, the Lord could have done more. Surely, in the minds of John and many others, he should have done more. So why hadn’t he? Why didn’t Jesus send a message to John much like the one we hear in our Old Testament lesson for today? One where Jesus proclaims that God has anointed and sent him to fulfill God’s covenant? “One day soon,” we can hear Jesus declare, “the devastation will be over, the Romans will be defeated and driven out, and the Promised Land will be restored to God’s people. And not just that,” Jesus goes on to say, “On that day, no one will be homeless, everyone will receive a living wage, and the scales of justice will be restored. You know what I have already done, now see what I am about to do. Come out of your jail cell, John, and join me in bringing about this new kingdom.”

At least one of the hard gospel truths in this passage is that it's difficult to be the coming Lord without disappointing a lot of people, especially when they've been waiting for a long time. Because, you see, until you actually show up, they can imagine you almost any way they want. They can draw up your job description so that it's ready for you just as soon as you appear. And let's be honest, the Jews were not ignorant. They had spent years reading Scripture and reflecting on the history of their people. They had a pretty good idea of where they had gone wrong and of what ailed the world. So when Jesus appeared and they started to realize that he was not exactly what they were expecting, there were many like John who began to question him. And, truth be told, it's hard to blame them. After all, they had been waiting over five hundred years for the coming of the Messiah. The last ten months of waiting amidst the current pandemic, at least personally, have felt like an eternity. Ten months of waiting for the day when things will finally begin to return to normal. Now imagine waiting over five hundred years and when that day at long last arrives, the Messiah you've been waiting for does not take up arms and reclaim the Promised Land, but begins preaching about non-violence and the kingdom that awaits us in heaven. What if the new normal we've been waiting for still includes no in-person church services, social distancing, and mask mandates? If so, I know that I'll at least have some questions and some doubts, probably not so different than when John asked Jesus whether he is "the one who is to come" or whether John must "wait for another."

The truth is that the message that we hear in today's Gospel lesson was meant for John, but not for him alone. Before sending away John's followers, Jesus said to them, "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." This beatitude has been translated many ways, including "Blessed is [anyone] who does not fall away because of me" and blessed is anyone "who does not find me an obstacle to faith." The Greek word behind these translations is *skandalon*, which

makes the literal translation something more like, “Blessed is anyone who is not scandalized by me.” But to those listening to Jesus, it meant a stumbling block. Jesus knew that his followers were beginning to have doubts because he did not match their expectations, and that some of these people were beginning to lose their faith. So what, we might ask, made John different? What made Jesus declare that John was not just a prophet, but more than a prophet? And what made him go on to proclaim that no person has ever been born who is greater than John the Baptist? The answer? Well, at least to me, the answer is that, even in the midst of his doubts, John turned to Jesus. Jesus was the one in whom John placed his faith, so Jesus was the one whom he turned to when all else seemed lost. And notice, Jesus did not hold these doubts against him. Rather, he sought to reassure John’s faith by confirming who he was, just like Jesus seeks to reassure us when we bring our doubts to him.

John was not the first person to doubt Jesus, nor will he be the last. In the decades following Jesus’ death and resurrection, Christians struggled with their expectations of him. Scripture had told them that the Lord will cause water to break forth in the wilderness, lions to lay down with lambs, and the kingdom of heaven to be established on earth. How could they maintain that Jesus is Lord when he had done none of these things? For some Christians, the answer was to place more and more emphasis on the type of healing and reconciliation that Jesus will bring when he returns. In effect, like the Jews before them, they were writing their own job description, but in this case of who Jesus will be and what he will do on the day of his Second Coming; a job description that for some Christians has grown quite lengthy over the years. Other Christians, like those we hear of in the Book of Revelation, believed that Jesus would return during their lifetimes, and that when that happened, he would no longer be a restorer of sight, a healer of the sick and lame, or a raiser of the dead. Rather, Jesus would be a conquering hero

riding in on a white horse, who would vanquish all their enemies with a sharp sword, before throwing the worst of them into a lake of fire that never goes out. On that day, these Christians believed, there would be no more doubt in anyone's mind that Jesus is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. His earlier humility would be revealed to have been a disguise or a temporary condition that vanished when he came again in power and great might. And no one would ever again have their expectations of Jesus go unfulfilled.

This and every Advent season, we look forward to the coming of our Lord, not just in our hymns and prayers, but also in our hearts. And on that day when Jesus comes, some of us will surely be disappointed. Because the truth is that we are not so different from those early Christians. Amidst the waiting, we too have grown far too convinced that Jesus was sent to give us the kind of world, the kind of life, and the kind of Savior that we want and expect. Except, the Jesus we meet that day will be the exact same person he always was; someone who loves us so much that he was born in a lowly manger, dedicated his life to teaching us how to love God and one another, and revealed to us the depths of God's love on the cross and in the empty tomb. No, in Jesus Christ we don't find the Savior we want or expect, but the Savior we need. Praise be to God for giving us such an amazing gift that Christmas morning, and for always being there with us amidst our doubts, like he has been for so many Christians, and like he was for John the Baptist as he sat in that dark, damp jail cell. Amen.