



"Though the Darkness Hide Thee: What Do You Hope to See?"

Advent Sanctuary Worship Sermon Series – No. 2

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

Matthew 11:2-11

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?" Jesus answered them, "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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

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? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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.' 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."

Legend has it that Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, was born on the summer solstice, when the days are longest, filled with more light than dark. Six months older than Jesus, Scripture says that he leapt in his mother's womb when their mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, met in Galilee. Even then, we say, John recognized that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Light of the World.

John himself becomes a prophet, pointing the way, setting the stage. The forerunner, we call him. But in the story we hear today, we have fast-forwarded. John's at the end of his ministry now, through with all that preaching and baptizing at the River Jordan. He created such a stir that King Herod has thrown him in prison for fear that he might start a revolution. And in that dark, depressing, intimidating cell, he gets word of the ministry of Jesus, the work of teaching and preaching and healing. Evidently, John doesn't much like or trust what he hears. And so he sends his disciples to challenge his cousin, asking: "Are you really the one? Or are we to wait for another?"

What's going on here? We see that Matthew calls Jesus in this passage "the Messiah." But John has his doubts. Why? How could this one tasked to prepare the way of the Lord, how could this one so close to Jesus question what was going on?

We have to read into the text a bit to answer these questions. But it's fairly safe to say, based on the evidence of the gospel writers, that John envisioned a very different sort of messiah and a different sort of kingdom. John was fierce and harsh, lightening in a bottle, you might say. It was he who railed at those who came to hear him preach, calling them a "brood of vipers". John warned repeatedly of the wrath to come. John threatened the axe ready to cut down every tree not bearing fruit, destined for the unquenchable fire. John had taken to heart the words of the prophet Isaiah we heard Jamie read: "Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."

John, like many in our own day, believed that the Lord would come to judge and punish, that his advent would be marked by power and might. John believed that God would work his purposes out in this world using the means and methods of domination and warfare. We can't blame him for this. Many in his time thought that this would be the modus operandi of the new Messiah, that this was how God would set the world aright and save his people. John had many disciples who shared his vision. This is what they were looking for.

John loses his freedom and later his very life for what he believed. No wonder, then, sitting in that horrible dark prison cell, the things he was hearing about Jesus caused him deep doubt. Jesus had turned out to be a very different kind of Messiah than anything John had ever imagined. This was NOT what he had been looking for. Sitting in darkness, his sight grew dim. He most certainly felt betrayed and abandoned.

We can imagine the anguish, the desperation in his voice, when he sends a few of his disciples to ask Jesus point blank: "Are you the one? Or should we wait for another?"

What proof does Jesus offer? What kind of evidence does he present to make his case? He turns it right back on them. "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."

Then Jesus turns around and speaks to the crowds about John. Does he criticize him for getting it wrong? Does he denounce his cousin and the error of his ways? No. He shows the same compassion for John as he does for every single one of them, and all of us who get it wrong. "John is a prophet", he said, "the forerunner, and no one is greater than he. Yet even so", he clarified, "my disciples, those who have understood me, those who believe in me, those who follow my way, those who know of what kingdom I speak, even the least of these is greater than John."

As a colleague has said, “John is part of a passing understanding of God. [Instead] Jesus is proclaiming God...whose only power to redeem, to change, to re-make humankind is the power of suffering, persuasive love. This is the God Jesus proclaims in his teaching, his life and his death. This God extracts no price, knows no vengeance, requires no blood, no fire...Jesus comes announcing salvation to sinners, a home-coming for the lost and the sick at heart...all may find the kingdom, all may enter, no matter how damaged, how blind, how deaf, how sinful.” Jesus comes bringing good news. And if we can’t see it either, perhaps that’s because it’s still not what we’re really looking for...

Does not the world still find the way of John more compelling, more true? In so many places around the world, hatred is passed from generation to generation and there seems no end to the bloodshed and the fear. Do we not still question the way of Jesus in our hearts? Are you the one, or should we look for another? Can we believe our eyes? Perhaps his reply is no less provocative today: “Go and tell all that you see and hear: 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.”

This has been the question to every generation of the faithful since that time. In the mid-nineteenth century, a young seminary student at the Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, surveyed the world around him. It was the time of the American war with Mexico and violent upheaval in Europe. It was the time of the potato blight in Ireland and the resultant massive exodus of poor, unskilled young adults who lived in poverty in the city of Boston and other urban areas. Edmund Hamilton Sears was a Unitarian minister prone to illness and depression, and the weight of the world lay heavy on his shoulders. He put his longing and his hope into poetry and in those years wrote an early version of the Christmas carol we now know as “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.”

We’ll sing it as our closing hymn in this morning’s service. But I want to share with you two additional verses penned by Sears, which have long since been dropped from the carol as we have come to know it. These verses make his original message even more clear and pointed.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long,
Beneath the angel strain have rolled
two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
the love song which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
and hear the angels sing!

O Prince of Peace, thou knowest well
this weary world below;
Thou seest how men climb the way
with painful steps and slow.
O, still the jarring sounds of earth
that round the pathway ring,
And bid the toilers rest awhile,
To hear the angels sing.

Thanks to Rev. Sears and this carol, and so many of the others we love to sing during this season, we are reminded that Jesus is the Messiah of the God of love, the God who longs to come and live among us. The God who yearns for healing and wholeness for us and for the whole creation. This is the one! We do not need to wait for another.

And now, Jesus turns the question back onto us. Everything depends on our response. Will we accept a part in the on-going drama of the unfolding Kingdom of Heaven? Are we looking and listening and perceiving his work in our world even now? Will we be faithful enough to see the almost imperceptible signs of new life, revealing the presence of God in our midst? And then, will we be bold enough to go and tell others what we ourselves have seen and known and heard?

May God give us eye to see in the dark and then testify to what we know to indeed be true.

Amen

Notes:

Quote from Rev. Simes sermon “Repair the World”, Dec. 12, 2001

Gratitude to Rev. Katie Hines-Shah in Living by the Word, The Christian Century, Nov. 23, 2016.

John Cobb. Jesus’ Abba: The God Who Has Not Failed. Chicago: Fortress Press, 2016.