

sermon-12/16/07 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Are You the Messiah”  
Matt. 11:2-11

Could John the Baptist have had his doubts? That is the question many commentators have asked when they read this passage in Matthew. Herod, furious at being chastised by John for philandering with his sister-in-law, throws John into prison. John has faithfully preached repentance. Jesus said John has prepared the way for him to come into the world. Jesus even says no one ever born of a woman is greater than John. That is an amazing compliment when you think about the previous Jewish heroes like Moses, David, and the prophets.

And here is this great man stuck in prison toward the end of his life on earth, questioning if Jesus is really the Messiah. He has a point, too. John thought the Messiah was going to come judging those who had abused their power. He would separate the wheat from the chaff. He would baptize with fire as well as with the Spirit. John couldn't wait to see the bad guys get their just desserts.

But, if Jesus was that kind of Messiah, why was John in prison? Why did Herod continue to get away with his shenanigans? As we know, soon after being imprisoned, Herod had John beheaded. Herod couldn't resist the request of a beautiful woman to have John's head on a platter. The rich and cruel continue their bad behavior. How could Jesus be the Messiah?

It reminds me of one of Woody Allen's quotes spoken by an actor in one of his movies. The man says, "I don't hate God. No, I think the worse thing you can say about God is that he is an underachiever." Many accused Jesus of being an underachieving Messiah. He did not put the oppressors in their places. Like John, he died a cruel death at the hand of yet one more petty leader. He died a lonely death abandoned by his followers.

I would suspect John is not alone in his doubts. Sure, we say the Messiah has come in the baby Jesus. We sing songs to that affect. But do we really believe the Messiah has come? As one commentator has said, John represents those of us who wonder whether Jesus' non-violent ways can be the true Messiah in a world where power rules the day. Do we want to follow the kind of Messiah Jesus represents? Will we accept his methods to bring the Kingdom of God to this earth?

In other words, what kind of Messiah do we seek in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Who do we trust with our lives to lead us in the ways of peace? Is the Messiah to whom we give allegiance only a Messiah for our personal, religious lives? Or, do we follow a Messiah that informs how we are to act in the public sphere in this dangerous world of ours?

Let's look at Jesus' answer to John's poignant question from prison. John is wondering if his life has been for naught. He sends two of his disciples to Jesus with that haunting question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus, as one scholar notes, says in essence, “Look. God is at work here, maybe not with ‘unquenchable fire,’ but at work just the same.” Jesus goes on to list what he is about. It is a list that includes healing and acts of compassion. It is a list that shows great concern for the poor. Did that satisfy John? We never hear. Does it satisfy us? If it does, what does that mean for us?

Graham Cook, a member of the United Reformed Church in London, wrote this poem:

*The signs of his presence*

The signs of his presence  
are blind people who can see,  
the lame who walk again,  
those whose skin diseases are cleared,  
the deaf who can hear,  
the dead who are brought back to life,  
and the poor who have reason  
for delighting in the good news they hear.

If these are the signs of his presence  
and we are the ones who say he is coming,  
what are we going to say  
when they ask where he is?  
What are we going to do  
to justify our claim  
that he is on his way?  
Singing carols  
with mince pies afterwards  
is not enough.

I suspect if we accept Jesus’ definition of what the Messiah brings, and we claim to be part of the body of Christ in our day, then it will mean we have some work cut out for us. I am sure we will still have our nagging questions about the difference the Messiah has made in our world. After all, there still is a ton of cruelty and injustice we can’t ignore. But, as one commentator has noted, things may not be all that better since Jesus came to us long ago, at least for a good portion of the world, but we do know how to spot the new creation whenever it breaks out.

Each time we see healing take place in the world, each time someone blinded by their prejudices sees clearly, each time those who have been tone deaf to the cries of the poor begin to hear their pain and respond, the Kingdom of God is peeking through the veil of existence. Each time reconciliation happens between enemies, between estranged family members, and even between factions in the larger church, we can claim the Messiah’s presence. Each time life and hope spring forth when we despaired that hope was dead, we know the source of that life.

It is our job as Christians to notice and get involved. Of course, this is not easy. Because, as that same scholar says, Jesus chose to risk the cross in his bringing salvation to the world, God's justice, mercy, and peace "are probably not as likely to come by means of unquenchable fire as they are by means of suffering love." In that way, our Advent waiting for the Messiah always has a hint of Good Friday in it.

Each time we work and sacrifice for peace, we affirm a Messiah that chose the cross. Each time we give to the poor, we become a part of the Messiah's band of disciples. When we chose to increase our mission giving here at Newport this coming year, we took a step toward living ever more fully into accepting the Messiah's agenda for the world where giving money away trumps being overly cautious in our budget.

Christmas is a full season. We have wonderful, warm feelings at Christmastime. It is a time to enjoy all the good cheer we can experience. But it is also a time to reorganize our lives if we truly believe Jesus was and is the Messiah.

It reminds me of a great quote by E.B. White. He said, "I wake up in the morning torn between the desire to enjoy the world and to improve the world. That makes it difficult to plan the day." May God be with us all as we plan our days this Advent season, and the entire year. Amen