

The New Testament describes John the Baptist as a man of conviction who freely and courageously spoke his mind. When John offered his baptism for repentance, he claimed it was nothing compared to what was coming: the Messiah would baptize people with the Holy Spirit and fire. Then when Jesus came to be baptized, John initially objected. It should be the other way around, he said - "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" After Jesus replied that it was entirely appropriate "in this way to fulfill all righteousness," John agreed to baptize him.

In last week's Gospel, we heard John call the Sadducees and Pharisees who came to be baptized a brood of vipers. That probably made John really popular with them. Perhaps those harsh words were an ancient version of the expression "You're lying like a snake." John may have regarded the Jewish religious leaders as insincere traitors. One commentator has noted that religious leaders in Matthew "are never only religious officials. As allies with Rome, they uphold a politically dominating, socially hierarchical, and economically exploitative system."<sup>1</sup>

Nor, apparently, did John mince words with the political leaders themselves. Matthew reports that John told Herod Antipas, the governor of Galilee, that his relationship with his brother's wife was unlawful. That may have been true, but it still wasn't anything Herod wanted to hear, so he arrested John and threw him in jail.

That's where today's Gospel finds John - in jail and removed from stirring up controversy. John now had a lot of time on his hands. There wasn't much to do with it except to mull things over. John had spoken truth to power and was paying the price for it, rotting away in a dank and dark cell.

Meanwhile, the reports he had heard about the activities of Jesus made him wonder: had he been mistaken about who Jesus was? The things Jesus was doing didn't sound all that impressive to John. Jesus had not baptized anybody with anything. Healing, teaching, and performing miracles were all fine things, but they weren't exactly messianic material. Jesus may have lifted the spirits of the downtrodden. But how was that going to end the brutal Roman occupation and the Jewish religious leaders' collusion with the empire?

---

<sup>1</sup> Warren Carter in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 1789.

So when some of John's disciples visited him in jail, John sent them off to ask Jesus a question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John may not have been disappointed, but there's little doubt that he was worried. If this was the dawning of a new messianic age, it did not appear to have much going for it.

You might have similar feelings coming to church today. Here we are, only two weeks away from Christmas on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent. The church has been decorated for over a week. Many of us have a tree up at home, with presents wrapped and lying beneath it. How does today's Gospel with John in jail wondering if Jesus is the real deal prepare us to move toward Bethlehem and join in the song of the angels? Today's Gospel is about as cozy and comfortable as a wet blanket in December.

But on the other hand, isn't this dark time of the year also sometimes a bit like a wet blanket? Approaching Christmas, people may feel pressure to pretend to be happy when they aren't so happy. But who wants to throw a wet blanket on the cheer of others? Like John in jail, we may have our share of concerns, worries, and disappointments, even during what has been described in song as

The hap-happiest season of all  
With those holiday greetings and gay happy meetings  
When friends come to call  
It's the hap-happiest season of all.<sup>2</sup>

So maybe we can relate to John's experience. Maybe we have hoped for more from Jesus than we've gotten, too: more good will between people, more generosity, more trust, more willingness to compromise, more harmony, more teamwork, and more concern for the wellbeing of others. And maybe in our Advent waiting, we also have longed for less - less violence, less warfare, less selfishness, less deceit, less anger, less betrayal, less hatred, and less contempt. Maybe all of these things have been on our wish list for Christmas for years. Maybe we still pray for them and wait for them while we find ourselves incarcerated in the darkness of December's short days and long nights. We may not be so far removed from John's experience after all.

Jesus tells John's disciples to go and tell him what they hear and see. John may not have been greatly impressed with their report. Hanging out with the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the dead, and the poor probably wasn't going to shake things up much at the top. The powers that be, the movers and shakers, would have no reason to worry. The final sentence in the reply Jesus gives to

---

<sup>2</sup> Edward Pola and George Wyle, "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year," 1963.

John's question may be the most interesting and compelling: "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Does this imply that Jesus thought John might be offended? Did Jesus suspect John thought he wasn't acting enough like a proper messiah? The literal meaning of the sentence is actually a good bit more jarring - "And blessed is anyone who is not scandalized or caused to stumble by me."

Jesus realized that his words and actions might be perceived in the wrong way. It goes back to what Pastor Museus spoke about last Sunday, something she admitted she was afraid of, confirmation bias. As Paul Simon once described it in his song "The Boxer," "a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest." It's easy to do that generally, and it's easy to do that with the words of Jesus, too. There are plenty of things the Gospels tell us Jesus said that none of us want to hear or to do. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Even so, most of us have decided to keep our hands and eyes. We have made peace with these words of Jesus without maiming ourselves. We've decided that Jesus never intended for these words to be taken literally. Sometimes, the words of Jesus can be hard to take. The words of our parents, of our children, of our friends or of our spouse can be like that too. And our own words may be offensive and hard for our loved ones to take as well.

Today's Gospel reading challenges us, like John the Baptist, to get real about Jesus and to get real about ourselves. John's words speak for all of us. If the man who baptized Jesus and who was his relative, if he could wonder about who Jesus was, maybe it gives us permission to wonder, too. In the midst of our worries, concerns, and disappointments during a cold and dark December, it's okay to ask: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Yet just about as soon as we pop John's question, I suspect most of us know our own answer. Of course Jesus is the one. There's no one else for us to wait for as the Messiah but him. The one who stands with the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the dead, and who preaches good news to the poor is the one and only Messiah, hands down. We know he stands with those who hope and wait for a warm meal and a warm place to sleep at Room in the Inn in Nashville. We know he stands with people who wait for help following disasters caused by storms and fires around our synod. Jesus also stands with members of the Sioux Tribe, service veterans, and others who stand in extreme cold at Standing Rock in North Dakota to protect tribal lands and waters. Last month, the presiding bishop of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Elizabeth Eaton, wrote of this concern:

“This past August, the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly passed a resolution repudiating the doctrine of discovery. In it we pledged ‘to practice accompaniment with Native peoples.’ The doctrine declared that indigenous land was ‘unoccupied’ as long as Christians were not present. Land deemed ‘unoccupied’ was, therefore, ‘discovered,’ as if it had been previously unknown to humankind. This doctrine was used as justification for European monarchies, and later the U.S. government, to take land from Native people. Many of us in this church who are immigrants have benefited from the injustices done to the original inhabitants of this land where we now live and worship. Our church also includes American Indian and Alaskan Native people, who have been on the receiving end of the injustices done. When we repudiated the doctrine of discovery, we Lutherans pledged to do better together in the future than we have in the past.” Bishop Eaton concluded her letter with these words:

“Acknowledging the complexity of this issue and the limitations sin places on human decisions, I believe that we are called as a church to support the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe: to stand with the Tribe as they seek justice, to encourage our congregations to pray for them and to offer material support, and to examine the racism inherent in our system that contributes to the current crisis. As promised in our resolution repudiating the doctrine of discovery, we will listen to tribal leaders and respect their wisdom.

We will lend our presence when invited, our advocacy when requested, the resources of our people when asked, and our prayers, friendship and repentance at all times.”<sup>3</sup>

So let us go and tell others what we see and hear... the poor in Nashville at Room in the Inn have good news preached to them. The victims of disaster around our synod have good news preached to them. The Sioux at Standing Rock in North Dakota have good news preached to them. And blessed are those who take no offense, blessed are those who are not scandalized by the words and actions of Jesus in behalf of the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed people of the world.

---

<sup>3</sup> Statement from ELCA Presiding Bishop Eaton on Standing Rock, November 14, 2016.