



**Lexington
Presbyterian Church**
Faith • Fellowship • Service • Since 1789

Tidings of Comfort and Joy?

Matthew 11:2-11 & Isaiah 35:1-10

A sermon by William M. Klein

11 December 2016

1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus **2** it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. **3** Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. **4** Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." **5** Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; **6** then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; **7** the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. **8** A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. **9** No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. **10** And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (Is. 35:1-10 NRSV)

Our gospel lesson opens with John the Baptist in prison. He is there because he couldn't keep his mouth shut. When he heard of King Herod's philandering, John's denunciation was swift and unrestrained.¹

Apparently John's disciples had access to him in prison...because it was through them that John received word of Jesus' activities. Listen to the gospel text for today.

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples **3** and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" **4** Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: **5** 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. **6** And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." **7** 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? **8** What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. **9** What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. **10** 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." **11** 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. (Mt. 11:2-11 NRSV)

1

From his prison cell, John the Baptist sent disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the long expected Messiah...or shall we keep waiting and looking?"

There may be two ways for us to think about John's question and the task he gave his disciples. To begin with, John's inquiry strikes us as odd because John baptized Jesus. He called Jesus the "one who is coming," the "more powerful" one, the one who "will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire," the one who carries a "winnowing fork in his hand" to separate the wheat from the chaff.² Was John having second thoughts about Jesus and about what he'd said?

Maybe...but, if so, let's not judge him too harshly. After all, imagine what it must have been like for the poor man. He worked hard on behalf of the Coming One. And look at the thanks he got: a prison cell, peeking between bars for any sign of light...maligned and forgotten. It would only be natural for him to wonder why he should be cast off so discourteously.

The larger issue, though, had to do with what John expected of the Coming One. If you recall, John thought the Messiah's task was to carry out the final judgment. John believed the Messiah would have an axe in one hand to chop down unfruitful trees and a pitchfork in the other to sift the chaff in his granary.³

John heard nothing to convince him Jesus was doing any of these things. Jesus was teaching in the synagogues, preaching good news to the poor, and healing every disease and infirmity?⁴ Jesus was calling hearers to a fundamental morality - to such conventional deeds as scriptural reverence, prayer, sexual purity, nonviolence, and even the love of enemies.⁵ This surely seemed a far cry from final judgment, purifying fire, and the separation of wheat from chaff.

2

Now this is one way to interpret the question an imprisoned John sent his disciples away with. But there could be a second approach.

You are well aware Matthew's Gospel account was written as many as 60 years after the events took place. What may surprise you is that so many years later John the Baptist disciples were still running around. The Gospel writer's reason for recalling John's words from prison may have been aimed at those remaining disciples still devoted to John...providing them with John's own encouragement for them to follow Jesus instead.

If that was the case, then John's question of Jesus was for his disciples' benefit, not his. This interpretation suggests John knew full well Jesus was the Expected One...in spite of the numerous ways Jesus was not doing the kind of things he expected the Messiah to be doing. As well, this interpretation acknowledges John understood his own role...that of being the forerunner to the Messiah, the Expected One. Keenly aware his work and life were drawing to a close, John wanted his disciples to follow Jesus.

3

Is one of these interpretations the right interpretation? I think it is useful to hold both of them together because each adds something to the story. And neither alters what happened when the disciples went with their question to Jesus.

When John's disciples delivered to Jesus their assigned question, you will have noticed that Jesus didn't say, "Yes, I am the one." He told them to look at what he had

been up to: the blind were given sight, the cripple walked, lepers were cured, the deaf heard, the dead were raised to life, and the good news was preached to the poor.

Jesus could have said, "Go tell John to look up Isaiah 35" - because in a sense, what Isaiah described is what he was up to. In a kind of code, then, familiar to those steeped in scripture, Jesus was telling John and John's disciples and Matthew's readers 60 years later, "As you can see from reading Isaiah, I *am* the one...I am the Messiah."⁶

Jesus was reminding them of an important way Isaiah had said they would know God's Messiah: the blind will see, the lame will walk, and the deaf will hear.⁷ The dead will be raised and the poor will receive good news.⁸

Any idea where Jesus would suggest they look in our day? He might suggest they could see the living God at work where the immigrant and refugee are being welcomed. After all, Jesus himself was a refugee. Wasn't it shortly after his birth that he was taken in the middle of the night by his parents to Egypt to escape persecution? It is surly odd that we so readily worship a refugee on Sunday and ignore one on Monday.⁹

I understand there is a movement across this country to post signs on church yards announcing that the church welcomes immigrants and refugees. Is such a sign really necessary?...I mean, of course that is what the church is supposed to be doing. Must we also put signs out declaring we believe in forgiveness and compassion and love? But maybe we are at a point where the church must remind itself and the world who the church is and for what we stand.

Several years ago Gustavo Gutiérrez, Peruvian theologian, said that if we want to find the living God in our own day we should look **wherever alienation is being overcome, injustices are being removed, peace is being restored, and love is being lived out.**¹⁰

Jesus was saying to the disciples who came from John that, despite anyone's misgivings, selective reading of scripture, or wishful thinking...what God was doing in and through Jesus was a fulfillment of the deepest promises of the Old Testament prophets.¹¹ His ministry to the poor, the powerless, the refugee, the nobodies was in fact the intended work of God's Messiah.

4

You and I hear all of this...and at some level we say, "Yes, Jesus was the One." The very fact that we are here this morning says we believe Jesus was the One. But at another level we identify with John and his disciples because we find ourselves wondering..."If he was the One, why is there so much pain and cruelty and hatred and strife in this world? If he was the One, why are so many people all of a sudden afraid it is open season on them? If he was truly the Prince of peace, why isn't peace a reality?"

Jesus has come and gone. Perhaps in his day the blind were given sight, the lame were made to walk, and the dead were raised...but there are plenty of blind and lame people around today. Perhaps in his day the powerless felt empowered...but there are plenty of people around today who feel as if their backs are against the wall.¹²

Not very often do you and I see the proud being toppled from their thrones - we don't see the poor being lifted up. For all their high-sounding altruistic rhetoric, we see the powerful doing their best to keep down the poor. Hunger is as much a scourge as it ever was. Greedy, selfish people look very much like our ancient forebears. We see the

rich and powerful becoming richer and more powerful. We see overflowing prisons. Peace on earth is more a Christmas card slogan than a reality.

John the Baptizer and his disciples had their reasons for wondering about Jesus. And so do we. If Jesus was the "One," why don't our lives and why doesn't our world look more like he was?

5

You know where I am going with this, don't you? In reality, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is changing lives - even now - even in our midst. The risen Lord is the Messiah - and through him people's lives are being changed.

The challenging and perhaps convicting thing is that you and I are the evidence that Jesus is or is not the Christ. What I mean is that when people today come asking if Jesus is the One, they will not find the physical, historical Jesus. They will find...us.

Are you busy with the things Jesus was busy with? Are you welcoming the stranger, reaching out to the poor, ministering to those who live in darkness? People who come looking will know whether or not Jesus is the Expected One by our words and deeds.

6

A couple of weeks ago Beth Thompson's 61-year old nephew, Richard Braford, died. After a career on the Roanoke police force, he spent his retirement years as a security officer at Roanoke Memorial Carilion Hospital. When it was clear he did not have long to live he told his family he wanted to die in the Emergency Room.

You heard me right. Most people want to die at home. They don't want to die in an Emergency Room...but that had become a special place for him...a place he felt at home.

After being in the hospital for a brief time, he asked to be taken to the Emergency Room. According to Beth he had a constant flow of visitors...other security officers, police men and women from across Roanoke, hospital workers... He warmly received every visitor. The next day he died.

At his memorial service one of the hospital administrators announced that a special room had been set aside adjacent to the Emergency Room...a room to which families dealing with a tragedy could retreat for some privacy. The room would bear Beth's nephew's name.

When I heard Beth tell this story I asked if I could share it...and she immediately gave her approval. I wanted to tell Richard's story because of the influence he obviously had upon the hospital staff and upon the people and families that found themselves in the Emergency Room. Day in and day out for years he welcomed the stranger and made him or her feel welcome. He treated every person who came through the door with dignity and respect. In the course of his years as a police officer and then a security officer no telling how many forgotten, disinherited, dispossessed, and lonely people he ministered to.

I didn't know the man...but I would not be surprised if John's disciples could have learned Jesus was the Expected One by watching him and talking to him. They could have talked to the people whose lives he touched. They could have talked to the hospital staff and the security officers. They could have talked to the troubled families in the waiting room waiting to hear a word about some loved one.

I'd like to think John's disciples could talk to you and me...and that what they saw us doing would let them know what it means for Jesus to be Lord. Amen.



Lexington Presbyterian Church
120 South Main Street
Lexington, Virginia 24450
www.lexpres.org

Endnotes:

¹ Van Harn, Roger E. 2001. The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts – The Gospels. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 64. According to the historian Josephus, John was sitting in Herod's fortress-prison at Machaerus on the eastern side of the Dead Sea.

² Matthew 3:11-12.

³ Bruner, F. Dale. 2004. Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1: The Christbook. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 505. See Matthew 3:1-12.

⁴ Cousar, Charles B. et. al. 1995. Texts for Preaching: Year A. Louisville: WJK Press, 26.

⁵ See the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5-7.

⁶ Bruner, 508.

⁷ Isaiah 29:18; 35:5-6.

⁸ Isaiah 26:19; 61:1.

⁹ Yancey, Philip. 2014. Vanishing Grace. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 120. Citing Share Claiborne.

¹⁰ Kung, Hans. 2009. What I Believe. NY: Continuum Books, 91.

¹¹ Long, Thomas G. 1997. Matthew. *Westminster Bible Companion*. Louisville: WJK Press, 125.

¹² Thurman, Howard. 1996 ed. Jesus and the Disinherited. Boston: Beacon Press, from the *Foreword*. Repeatedly Thurman announced that he was attempting to explore and explain "what the teachings of Jesus have to say to those who stand at a moment in human history with their backs against the wall...the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed." In essence he was surveying the world of the oppressed and asking how it might be possible for human beings to endure the terrible pressures of the dominating world without losing their humanity, without forfeiting their souls.