

A sermon preached by Rev. Bob Undercuffler December 15, 2013
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Isaiah 35:1-10 Matthew 11:2-11

“A Dumb Question ... or Not?”

John – was baptizing people down along the Jordan River. There were crowds of people ... and excitement. Some said John was eccentric – weird ...and he had a startling message ...

“A person is coming who will turn this world—turn our lives topsy turvy...and so make things right. The kingdom of heaven is near.
THE RULE OF GOD IS ON THE DOORSTEP!

And he pointed an accusatory hand towards the religious leaders.

”You brood of vipers. “Don’t say among yourselves ...We have Abraham as our ancestor, for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Even now the ax is being laid to the root of the tree ... every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (now that gets my attention)

”One who is more powerful than I is coming ... I’m not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire. He will gather wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

And Jesus walks into that throng, down by the riverside, to be baptized by John. And as Jesus comes up out of the water, suddenly the heavens open to him and he sees the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

And a voice from heaven; ”This is My Son ... My Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

What a remarkable day. It was like an Ordination and Installation and a Ravens and Eagles win all rolled-up into one. The happenings ... the words ... the feelings were engraved into the hearts, minds and memories of those who were there ... of those who participated. Certainly an experience John, the Baptist will never forget.

But now ... three years later ... THREE YEARS AND SOME 8 chapters in the book of Matthew later ... JOHN THE BAPTIST IS LANGUISHING IN PRISON.

King Herod did it. King Herod had him jailed. After all, a king can only listen for so long to a wild and crazy guy talking about ANOTHER RULER and ANOTHER KINGDOM ... A KINGDOM OF GOD. RULED BY GOD. That's too much for King Herod.

And John was pointing towards Jesus – he was speaking of Jesus ... the MESSIAH. So soon crowds were following Jesus ... BIG crowds. Could this Jesus be the Messiah ... the King of the Jews? KING Herod would not/could not allow that.

And here's the final straw ... John the Baptist would not mind his own business. He called-out King Herod. John made a big stink that King Herod had taken and married the wife of his brother Philip.

So now John the Baptist ... the fiery preacher – the one who spoke truth to power ... anxious to welcome the Kingdom of God – God's rule ... and with keen hope as he followed the career of Jesus ... yet here he is stuck in jail. Definitely on the sidelines.

Now frustrated and afraid ... John sends some of his followers to Jesus with a big question. "Jesus ... are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another."

It was a good, honest question. John had such high hopes for Jesus. And he voiced the hopes and dreams of most all the people. That is, all who chafed under the rule of Rome.

All who were tired of the inequity of taxation ... watching their money flow back to Rome to build coliseums and grand monuments and fine roads ... while they lived in poverty.

They were tired of a religious system with pious leaders who were in cahoots with Roman occupiers ... who collected Roman taxes and enforced their laws...and so got all the breaks from that corrupt system.

They were weary of fastidious attention to the law of Moses which always left them feeling they had not

done enough to deserve God's love, so left them feeling even deeper guilt.

They were weary that their songs of lament far outnumbered their songs of joy and hope. O Lord, how can we sing your song – how can we sing any song in a strange and hostile land?

John needed a straight answer ... he represented the people ... the 90% **No, probably the 99%.**

“Jesus ...we have such great hope for you. **Establish God's rule – God's Kingdom ... NOW. But are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?**

NO, THAT IS NOT A DUMB QUESTION. For times are not getting better. We've worked ... and hoped ... and prayed ... and sought to be faithful ... and reared our children in the faith. **ARE YOU THE ONE?**

And they find Jesus. And they pour-out John's question. Really, it is their question, also. “Jesus, are you the one to come, or shall we look for another.” (I wonder...has that question ever crossed your mind ... resided in your heart, too?)

And Jesus replies ... “Look what's going on here ... Listen to what's happening here ... take it all in ...”Go tell John:

The blind receive their sight,
 the lame walk,
 the lepers are cleansed,
 the dead are raised,
 and the poor have good news brought to them.
 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Having received that word, John's followers return to the prison and report to John. I'm certain they made a full report, for that's the way it is with the Hebrew people,,, with people of the middle east. They see it all...they tell it all. ”John, we saw for ourselves ... “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

We can only imagine John's response:

John may have said ... “That’s all well and good, but I’m still in prison.” Romans remain my jailers. Along with their Jewish lackeys who have given in to the Romans.

And oppressive taxes keep rising,
 while Herod’s palace gains in opulence,
 and too much of our money goes off to Rome.
 There are no songs of joy in prison ...
 rather, hear the groans of lament.

JESUS ... ARE YOU THE ONE ... OR SHALL WE LOOK FOR ANOTHER? That’s an honest and heartfelt question.

And I believe it’s a question that rises in the hearts and minds of many ... even in these days.

I venture to say that the question occurs to most every church member ... has it come to mind for you?

A question that occurs even for those we count to have the strongest faith.

Is Jesus the real thing?

Is there truly anything of substance to our believing?

Has the church ... has Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church really taken hold of something that deeply matters, or is this business of Christmas and its Messiah only a fanciful tale, a little like Santa stories, charming, yes, but ultimately worthless and powerless against forces that stifle hopes and deaden dreams.

Are you the one ... or shall we look for another?

That’s a dangerous question. Especially for the one asking the question. So it is not a question we ask openly.

We don’t want to have our hand waving in the air with that question when someone of “real faith” and “spiritual depth” is in the room ... for they would never ask such a question.

Such a question, we speculate, implies weakness, and dullness and doubt. So best not to speak it. To ask such a question, we assume, is to appear without faith.

But what we have here in the scripture before us is that John, the brightest, most spiritual person in class is asking the question –

John is the one who affirmed awesome things about Jesus ...
 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'
 (John 1:29)

And a little later, in shining simplicity John declared "Jesus
 must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30)

John the Baptist had the answers. He had the conviction. He had the
 clarity that Jesus was the real thing and second to none. Jesus is the
 Messiah. No need to look for another.

But now he wavers. Questioning. Are you really the one ... or shall
 we look for another?

Yes, prison will do that to you. Shake your faith. Prison can drive doubt
 into anyone's heart. It's easier to trust in God in the bright sunlight
 when all is joyful and free, but let the iron doors of difficulty slam shut,
 and doubt grows there in the darkness. **Are you for real Jesus?**

But it was not prison alone that made John ask his question-and the
 question that sticks in our throats, also. It was something about Jesus
 himself. Something that just didn't add up. Jesus did not act the way
 John thought a Messiah should behave.

Yes, John's faith wavers for he recognizes a different side of Jesus.
 Or better, may I say, a more complete Jesus, the Messiah. The
 anointed one of God. Ushering-in the rule of God which has to do with
 subtle – yet powerful stirrings such as --
 The blind receiving their sight,
 the lame walking,
 the lepers being cleansed,
 the dead raised,
 and the poor have good news brought to them.

And Jesus adds a blessing/a new beatitude ... "blessed is anyone who
 takes no offense at me."

Expressed in the positive Blessed are those who resonate with this
 understanding of God's Kingdom. **Blessed are those who recognize
 in the Messiah's way new life ... peace ... joy ... hope ... love.
 And who align their own lives accordingly.**

But you do know where that approach to life gets you. For John, he was beheaded at Herod's order and his head served-up on a large platter while his daughter and wife cheered and exchanged high-fives.

And Jesus, the Messiah ... the one who ushered-in God's rule? You know what happened to him ... In much the same way as John the Baptist ... he was sentenced by the combined power of Jewish and Roman authorities ... and stretched on a wooden cross to die.

...While the fickle crowd watched. For some, those who saw their power confirmed and consolidated, there were cheers and high fives. For others, deep lament. For they had lost everything they had. Especially HOPE.

Jesus ... Are you the one who is to come, or is it best that we look for another? Are you the Messiah? The one to usher-in God's way, of peace, with justice, Where blind see ... the deaf hear ... the dead are raised-up.

Here's what I believe. Here's what I have experienced ...

The presence of the living Messiah accompanies me through dark valleys and into sunlit pathways.

And I don't make that walk alone ...

 simply me with Jesus ...

 but I'm accompanied by a band of brothers and sisters who stretch way back and up-through questioning John the Baptist...to the present... and into the future.

I'm not going to name them all –

 but they are people of faith met in church and church camps—
 at ecumenical occasions and interfaith work camps and
 study and worship experiences ...

 in schools and college and even in seminary.

Those with eyes to see
and ears to hear

 and hearts to welcome will find that the Messiah is present
 in word and song and good work ...

 is present in friendship and gracious hospitality,
 tender touches and warm embrace.

 The Messiah is present in marches for peace
 with justice and actions to end violence now.

Jesus ... are you the one to come ... or shall we look for another? Not a dumb question at all. Let us open our eyes ... and ears ... and hearts. And wait with HOPE, PEACE, JOY and LOVE.