

**"Is Jesus The One?"**  
**Isaiah 35; Matthew 11:2-11**  
**Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, December 15, 2013**

John the Baptist was in prison. They say being in prison can break even a strong man and John the Baptist had every reason to feel broken. Not so long ago John was convinced the Kingdom of God was about to come in its fullest glory. He was also convinced Jesus was the one who would make it all happen. Now locked up in Herod's dungeon, and out of the picture, all John could do was wonder.

Two thousand years later we may wonder about John's despair until we remember that, unlike John, we know the rest of the story. He didn't live to see the Resurrection, but we not only know the rest of the story, we have 2,000 years of Christian history behind us. We also have our own faith experience that leads us to believe that Jesus is the one.

So John's question, for us at least, seems to be irrelevant. Or is it? Could it be, in our own way, we're still asking the same question without even knowing it. Ruminates about that for a few minutes.

Maybe you're not locked up literally in a dungeon but aren't we in a prison cell of our own making? Do you find yourself sometimes looking elsewhere, beyond Jesus, as you seek out the center of your universe? If you do, then maybe you're asking, **"Jesus, are you the Christ, or should I look for another?"**

Have you ever offered up a prayer like that even though you've been a church goer all your life? Sure, there're times when your convictions are strong. You believe in the Sovereignty of God, that God is all powerful, all knowing and all loving. On good days even the mystery of the trinity, the intimate relationship of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, seems to fall into place, even though you can't understand it.

But then there're times when you've been confused and isolated. Your carefully nurtured belief system, your ability to trust, was being undermined by people or events far beyond your control.

So, you still believed in Jesus intellectually but at the same time you've wondered, "What does Jesus have to do with me?" If you've ever felt this way, don't despair because you're in good company. All of us endure those dark and lonely moments from time to time. As we've just seen, even John the Baptist, who preached with vigor and conviction, had his moments of doubt and questioning.

Don't take that as a weakness. When your doubts get the upper hand don't be afraid, instead, dare to believe God is still working in and through your confusion. It's another God-given opportunity to be drawn closer to Jesus, who's always present, especially in our weaknesses and doubts.

It must be strange to think of John the Baptist being perplexed and troubled. When John first burst on the scene he was a formidable personality, a strong-willed, hard-nosed, principled man whose single purpose in life was to prepare the people for the coming of the long-promised Messiah. John didn't mince his words. When he spoke he disturbed the comfortable and comforted the disturbed.

Obviously John's personality and calling combined together in a powerful way and out of that combination came God's truth.

But then, John's career suddenly came to an abrupt halt when Herod threw him into prison. The longer he sat there the more he had to wonder if his cousin Jesus really was the one raised up by God to usher in the new age. Question: "How could John, of all people, doubt his first impression of Jesus?"

Answer: "For the same reason we sometimes doubt our first impression of Jesus."

Unfortunately, when you ask the question, "Is Jesus the one?" more times than not you wait for the answer you want to hear. In other words, you want to create Christ after your image instead of allowing Jesus to shape you after his image. In other words, we all bring into the mix our own preconceived notions about who Christ is supposed to be.

Two thousand years ago the Jews were waiting for the reincarnation of King David, a warrior king who'd kick out the Romans out and send them packing with their tails between the legs. Make no mistake, John the Baptist, as great as he was, being only human, also had his own notions about how his Christ was supposed to act. John's vision of the Messiah was steeped in the image of God's terrible swift sword that would cut a swath across the face of the earth with righteous judgment.

John was convinced when the Messiah came the Kingdom's presence in the world would bring about a just and righteous society organized under the authority of God. So, as John received news from the outside world about the direction of Jesus' ministry he must have been terribly confused. Can you hear John asking, "How could anyone say the Kingdom is here? There's still injustice. Men like Herod still ruled the day and all the while Jesus seems to be stumbling around doing his own thing. Sure he's drawing big crowds, people seemed to be impressed," but John must have wondered where is it all heading. Is Jesus the one I think he should be?"

Twenty centuries later men and women of good will still struggle with that very question. And we still project onto Jesus our notions of who Christ is supposed to be and stand for. In our

materialistic success-oriented society, which is especially evident at this time of year, we may invent for ourselves a success oriented or user friendly Jesus, a Christ who is all things to all people. Or since we also live in a dark and scary world we may be tempted to imagine Jesus as a sort of super hero who's on twenty-four hour alert ready and willing to keep us safe from trouble and heartache, punish the wrong doers and liberate the oppressed.

And yet, even though we still try to put Christ in a box, whether we realize it or not, we have within us the answer to our question because God has already put it there. Question is, are we ready to hear it?

You see, you have to be open to accept the answer you don't want to hear. Listen again to Jesus answer to John's quest. Jesus said to John's disciples, **"Go and tell John what 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."**

Now, we don't know how John responded to Jesus' answer. But chances are that since Jesus answered with a quote from Isaiah (John's very familiar with Isaiah.) John was comforted. Many times the prophet Isaiah prophesied of the coming of the Messiah and the coming of the Kingdom. Those who are physically and spiritually oppressed would be blessed with new life and hope. But even more than that Isaiah broadened this metaphor of new life by likening it to the rejuvenation of desert lands. **"The wilderness and the dry land shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with singing and great joy."**

Have you ever seen a desert bloom? You pass through miles of dry and barren stretches of wasteland but then in the middle of nowhere, around a natural spring, you find lush greenery and beautiful flowers. This marvel of nature is analogous to what happens to individuals and even communities of people whose lives are touched and freed whenever the active presence and power of God is let loose in our world. And the good news for us on this third Sunday in Advent is just this: the Kingdom is near because Jesus is already here and the proof of his coming is to be found in the lives of those who were once held captive but are now free at last. Living in a world whose brokenness is documented all too clearly on the evening news our natural tendency is to ask, **"God, why do you allow so much danger and suffering in the world?"** But I think Jesus would ask us in return. **"Why aren't you helping me bring joy and healing into the world?"**

From his prison cell John the Baptist focused on everything that was wrong especially since he himself was the victim of injustice. But by his answer Jesus wanted John to know all is not lost. There is hope and new life steadily taking root and blooming like a lush garden in the middle of a desert. God's active presence is already at work bringing things together, making all things work for good.

Putting it another way, even though sometimes it seems all is lost there's still reason for hope, but like John the Baptist, we still want answers now without wanting to take on the responsibility of being part of the answer in a world filled with questions. John's doubts and

questions, our doubts and questions, are born of impatience. It's hard for us who expect instant results to sit back and watch and wait for God to happen. We want our barren, desert-like lives to bloom now, but God asks us to actively wait by helping bring Christ's truth and grace through our love and service to others.

Simone Weil writes, "**Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.**" Waiting patiently is one way of saying to God, "O.K. Lord. I believe you're the one, my search for a savior is over; now begins your search of me. Seek me out. Purge me of anything keeping me from totally trusting in you. Help me be patient. Help me let go of all my notions of who you should be and instead show me who I should be. Heal me. Open my eyes and ears, let me hear and see you at work in the world. Empower me to walk with my neighbor who needs to experience your Good News, maybe through me. And above all, as I wait, help me trust you ultimately are the only one I need because you alone came to save the world.

Part of our Advent preparations includes opening yourself to God so God can help you search for and then uncover your purpose in life, how God wants to use you to live out the Christmas presence as you love God, your neighbor and yourself.

Is Jesus the one for you? Somewhere deep in your soul God has already put the answer to that important question. Allow the Holy Spirit to wear you down so you can be lifted up as you continue your Advent pilgrimage to Bethlehem's manger where you will find the Answer to life's biggest question.

Let us pray!