

“Go & Tell What You Hear & See”
A sermon preached at
Heart of the Rockies Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
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Christ is still knocking. It is not yet Christmas. But it is also not the great final Advent, the final coming of Christ. Through all the Advents of our life that we celebrate goes the longing for the final Advent, where it says: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5). Advent is a time of waiting. Our whole life, however, is Advent – that is, a time of waiting for the ultimate, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when all people are brothers and sisters and rejoice in the words of the angels: “On earth peace to those on whom God’s favor rests.”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Texts: Isaiah 61:1-4 & Matthew 11:2-5

We begin this morning in prison. With John the Baptist, locked up in Herod’s dungeon. Some of us, like John, imprisoned in the chains of a terrible misunderstanding. During the season of Advent, we’re asked to think about John for at least two reasons. First, John heralded the imminent coming of the one God had promised who would make the world right and whole again. All four Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – point to the ministry of John the Baptist to make the point that Jesus didn’t just show up. He had been expected. A second reason is more theological, more revealing about the nature and work of God.

Scholars believe that, back in the day, a lot of folks thought that John might be the Messiah. You remember, Matthew says that the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out into the desert wilderness to hear John preach about the coming kingdom of God. Even the religious leaders went out to check out John, because there were a lot folks confessing their sins and being baptized by John in the Jordan River. Many were saying, “Maybe John’s the one through whom God is about to shake things up and make things right. Maybe John is the one we’ve been waiting for.”

Matthew and the other Gospel writers want to make it clear that even though Jesus himself said some amazing things about John, John wasn’t the Messiah. Jesus is. It’s important to make the distinction because their vision of the kingdom coming and their understanding of God are markedly different, John’s and Jesus’. Their message begins with the same announcement. John, in the third chapter of Matthew’s Gospel: “Repent, for the kingdom of God has

come near (3:2).” Jesus, in the fourth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel: “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near (4:17).”

But what they meant by the kingdom and how they understood the God who is bringing the kingdom and how the kingdom will come, this is where they parted ways. John preaches against sin. He speaks in threats, warning about the wrath to come. His metaphors for the kingdom are violent. He speaks of an ax lying at the root of the trees, about one who is coming with a winnowing fork in his hand to separate the grain from the chaff and to burn the chaff in an unquenchable fire. According to John, God’s about to intervene in the affairs of the world in an obvious and irresistible way.

So you can imagine John’s excitement when Jesus comes out to him to be baptized. John says, “I should be coming to you to be baptized. What are you doing coming to me?” Jesus insists. John baptizes Jesus and if there were any lingering doubt in John’s mind about who Jesus is, it is erased when after having baptized Jesus the heavens open and the Spirit of God descends like a dove on Jesus and a voice from heaven is heard to say, “This my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased (3:17).” So let the judgment begin. Let the ax fly, and the winnowing fork do its work of separation. Fan the flames of the fire. We can’t know what was going on in John’s head, but surely he thought God’s divine cleanup of the world was about to begin at the hands of an angry Messiah.

Only John ends up in prison. This is where we begin this morning. With John the Baptist, locked away in Herod’s prison, locked up in this misunderstanding about the Messiah. Let me remind you why John is in jail. John had publicly criticized King Herod for his affair with his brother’s wife, Herodias, whom he took then as his wife. Consequently – because kings don’t like to be called out – Herod had John silenced by arresting him. John is languishing now in prison. Evidently, he is able to have visitors. His disciples seem to come and go, taking messages to John’s followers, bringing reports from the outside. John is keeping up on Jesus’ ministry. I imagine him anxiously awaiting the report that Jesus has begun swinging an ax in one hand and wielding a winnowing fork in the other.

Instead, John’s disciples report that Jesus isn’t railing against sinners. He’s forgiving them. They tell about Jesus’ kingdom metaphors: a sower sowing his field; yeast a woman mixes into a batch of dough; a pearl of great price for which a man sells everything he has to obtain; a mustard seed. John hears about Jesus feeding the hungry and cleansing a leper and healing a Roman centurion’s servant. What’s that all about – the Romans are part of the world’s chaff? The days, the months wear on and you know – the text doesn’t tell us, but we have to believe – that John is thoroughly confused.

So he sends his disciples to Jesus with a message. John's disciples deliver this message. It's a question. "Are you or aren't you? Are you the one we were waiting for, the one who is to come, or was I wrong? Are we to wait for another?" In other words, are you the Messiah or not? You know why John is asking this question. Jesus isn't behaving like the Messiah John anticipated.

Here's how Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopalian priest, puts it (*The Seeds of Heaven*, p.9). "John had wanted a tidal wave of a Messiah – someone who would be impossible to miss, who would make a clean sweep of things, who would witness to the omnipotent righteousness of God. What John got instead was a steady drip of mercy from a man named Jesus, in whom plenty of people saw no Messiah at all." Surely we can imagine his confusion, his self-doubt, his disappointment, his wondering about God.

On the outskirts of San Salvador, the capitol of El Salvador, there is what sociologists call an urban marginal community. I was there two weeks ago. I'd call it a ghetto. During El Salvador's civil war, when the fighting intensified in late 70s and 80s, hundreds of Salvadorans fled the violence in the countryside. They came to the city and settled along railroad tracks in a former garbage dump. They built little huts out of whatever material they could scrounge. Little food. No clean water. Illness and desperation. Over thirty years ago, Zoila Filomena Benavides began to build relationships in this impoverished community. She gathered others to help. One of the first things they did was organize a parish church – to keep the faith, for the sake of community, to meet the needs of their neighbors. They named the church Mary, Mother of the Poor. They asked the bishop for a priest, but the church wouldn't send one.

So Zoila and her friends did church on their own – following Jesus, doing the things they knew Jesus would do. Sharing what little food they had. Organizing a neighborhood council. Starting a medical clinic and a school and a day care to watch the children while parents sought work. When the church grew, when the bishop saw the good work that Zoila and others were doing, he relented and assigned a priest. The country hasn't recovered from its civil war. The economy is in shambles. Mary, Mother of God is ministering today in a marginal community of over 30 thousand persons living in utter poverty.

Zoila – she's 73 years old now – she spoke to our group. She told of the church's work, how the church has ministered to the needs of its neighbors under incredibly difficult circumstances. At one point, when guerillas and armed forces fought around the church, bullets flying, she and another woman, an American named Erica, shepherded eighteen children as they crawled along a wall to safety. It's gangs and drugs now. Zoila's son was murdered by a gang. Not long ago, on a journey of mercy, she saw her nephew being beaten by a gang.

“Why did you continue the work when it was so dangerous?” one of us asked. “The people, the children, they needed help. If I can help...”

She still goes out when called. At age 73 she still delivers food and medicine and the love of God, intervenes in neighborhood arguments, offers words of encouragement in a time of death. “The gangs,” she said, “they respect me now. They know it’s their mothers and fathers and grandparents and brothers and sisters the church is helping.” She paused. “Still,” she said, “I witness so many terrible things.” I hear echoes of John the Baptist in her lament. She said, “I feel so impotent. I don’t know if I can bear more.” We can’t fault John the Baptist for thinking, “Is Jesus the Messiah or not?” Some days I wish that John the Baptist had had it right, that the Messiah would intervene with a great show of power and sweep everyone’s doubts away along with the chaff. What we get instead – which can leave us broken and discouraged at times – is this steady drip, drip, drip of mercy Barbara Brown Taylor describes.

Listen, I know that both visions of the kingdom’s coming are here in the Bible: the one vision, God’s violent destruction of the earth; and the other, God’s patient, persistent, transforming love that makes all things new again. These two understandings of how God will ultimately be at work in the world: John’s, by way of a pointing finger and harsh threat, an ax, a winnowing fork and purifying fire; and Jesus’, by way of patient grace and forgiveness, healing and exorcism, enabling the blind to see and bringing the dead to life.

Author Shane Claiborne, when he comes up against such differing pictures, such contrasting texts in the Bible, he asks a simple question, “Which looks more like Jesus?” Because it’s our understanding that Jesus is the fullest and final revelation of who God is and what God’s up to in the world. I think this is the reason that all four Gospel writers mention John the Baptist at the outset of their Gospels. They’re putting his work and words up against Jesus’ – John’s threat of holy violence up against Jesus’ gift of holy patience and transforming grace – as a way to help us see John’s misunderstanding and to choose Jesus’ way, the way of the steady drip, drip, drip of mercy. The way that Zoila and the church of Mary, Mother of the Poor have chosen.

When John’s disciples asked Jesus, Are you or aren’t you the one?, he answered this way. He said, “You go and tell my cousin John what you hear and see: the blind are receiving their sight, the lame are walking, lepers are cleansed, the deaf have their ears opened, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Tell John this, too. Tell him that I hope this is enough for him, that he won’t take offense at me – blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me – at the way God is ushering in God’s kingdom, not by way of threat and ax and consuming fire.”

If you want to see more of how God is at work in the world, this steady drip, drip, drip, drip of mercy through which God is bringing his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, through which God is bringing all things back together again, I encourage you to tune in to CNN at 6 o'clock tonight and see the stories of the Ten Heroes that CNN has chosen this year – persons who work as unobtrusively as Jesus did caring for others, for the world around them. You'll see Sal Dimiceli, who has spent decades helping people get back on their feet assisting about 500 people a year with food, rent, utilities and other necessities. You'll hear about Dian Latiker who, when surrounded by gang violence in her Chicago neighborhood, opened her home to area youth and started a community program called Kids Off the Block, helping more than 1,500 young people since 2003.

You'll see Robin Lim who became a midwife after her sister died from complications during pregnancy. Since 2003, she and her team in Indonesia have helped thousands of low-income women have a healthy pregnancy and birth. You'll hear Bruno Serato tell about his work serving free pasta dinners to children, many of whom are poor and live in motels with their families – dinner seven days a week to more than 300 children.

Who'd have thought that CNN would be responding to Jesus' charge to John's disciples? "Go and tell what you have seen and heard." Stories of the steady drip of grace and mercy all around us.

Still, I know that for some, like John, it's just not enough. They're holding out for a violent intervention on God's part, for Jesus the Teacher and Healer, the Suffering Servant, the One Crucified for the sins of the world, to return as Jesus the Violent Conqueror. Come Christmas morning, when you look in over the edge of the manger and see that tiny baby, lying there so fragile, so vulnerable – *Emmanuel*, we say, *God with us* – it's understandable that we may have some doubts, like John who was waiting for something more. "Really, God? It all comes down to this: a mother and adoptive father caring for the little one in a harsh and troubled world? It all comes down to Mary and Joseph and Zoila and the rest of us caring for your children?"

Blessed are we if we take no offense at the seemingly insignificant manger scene.

— Jeff Wright
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