

**Isaiah 35: 1-10**  
**Matthew 11: 2-11**  
**December 11, 2016**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**Third Sunday of Advent**

The very first verse of the reading from Matthew's gospel should grab our attention:

"When John heard in prison what the messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to Jesus, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'"

The first part is so subtle we might miss the point. "When John heard in prison what *the messiah* was doing..." Matthew is writing from a believer's point of view. He *knows* that Jesus is the messiah. For Matthew "Jesus" and "messiah" are synonymous. This is also true for Matthew's readers. They believe. They know the whole story. They have made the spiritual journey with Jesus to the cross and have believed the Good News that God raised Jesus from the dead. It goes without saying that Jesus of Nazareth *is the messiah*.

*But such is not the case with John.* For John, Jesus is a charismatic figure from a small town north of Jerusalem. All his life has been focused on one passion: to proclaim the coming of the messiah foretold by the prophets. He has sacrificed all worldly gain for this holy calling. He has become a man on the margins, a man in the wilderness. His entire life stands in stark and highly visible contrast to the corrupted priorities of his day. His message sounds a single note which never varies: "Repent for the messiah is coming." Since he has forsaken every material comfort he cannot be threatened. He does not need to compromise or soft-pedal his message.

When Henry David Thoreau wrote, "That man is most free who has the least to lose," he could have been speaking of John the Baptist.

We tend to assume that once John baptized Jesus his ministry was over and that he disappeared from the scene. This is not so. He continued his ministry in the wilderness. He proclaimed the coming of the messiah. But there is no record of John and Jesus ever meeting again. Months go by and then John confronts the king about his adulterous relationship and subsequent marriage to his brother's wife. He is put in prison.

While in prison he receives reports about the man he called the messiah. The reports are dramatic but also disturbing. John is a strict follower of the Law of Moses. He is an ascetic: he drinks no wine, eats no rich food. He wears a homemade garment of camel's hair and lived on wild locusts and whatever honey he could find. Imagine his reaction when he hears stories about Jesus turning water into wine, eating and drinking with sinners and violating the Sabbath! Surely no true messiah would do this! In the isolation of prison he is locked up with his own thoughts. He cannot go to Jesus personally. He begins to wonder if he has spent his entire life announcing the coming of the messiah and at the supreme moment of his ministry made a fatal mistake. Not only might he be wrong about Jesus, he has led hundreds of people astray.

Can you even begin to imagine his torment?

After a time of sleepless nights and anxious days, John summons some of his disciples and tells them to go to Jesus and ask a simple question: "Are you the one who is to come or shall we wait for another?" John is not looking for reassurance. He genuinely wants to know. For John it is better to know the truth and suffer the crushing disappointment than to live in the

illusion of denial. We have no idea how long he had to wait for Jesus' reply. It must have felt like a lifetime.

When Jesus hears John's question, he doesn't give a terse reply. He doesn't dismiss the disciples with a curt, "Yes, of course!" Indeed I detect in his response tenderness and humility. It is as if he senses John's anxiety and seeks to bring him peace. I imagine that when he hears the question, Jesus' features soften; his heart breaks with understanding and compassion. He answers the disciples inviting them to listen and see for themselves. What they will hear and see is the fulfillment of the vision of the prophets: healing, mercy, forgiveness, life out of death and lastly but no less important—good news brought to the poor.

Tenderly and humbly, with a rueful smile on his face Jesus says, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." This last statement is clearly meant for John. Jesus understands that his ministry does not fit what John expected. Jesus is no stranger to doubt. He knows the pain of uncertainty. He knows the power of self-accusation: "Yeah, you say all this, but *what if you are wrong?* He has already been tempted by the devil in the wilderness and refused to have anything to do with worldly power and glory. *But what if he was wrong?*

Friends, don't you ever have these moments? You have hopes and dreams. You have foundational beliefs which guide your days and with which you teach your children. If you are like me, you are painfully aware of all the ways you fail to live up to your own values. Yet you persist. You believe that Jesus is the messiah. You buck the trend of society by coming to a house of worship to be confirmed *in* and challenged *by* this belief. People around you seem to be doing fine without Jesus. It's not like you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior and suddenly everything became just hunky-dory. You struggle in a hundred ways. What benefit do

you get from this Sunday morning ritual? The apostle Paul was frequently confronted with these doubts. In a cry of faith mixed with a serious amount of doubt he cried, "If Christ is not raised from the dead, we of all people are most to be pitied."

Jesus himself would share John's spiritual anguish on the cross as he was tormented by Satan one last time with the question, "*What if you are wrong?*" This causes him to cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In this Advent season, the world does not need us to bluff through the season with false bravado. Our neighbors and colleagues will not be led to the manger by our self-righteous condemnation of the festival.

Instead I propose that we recognize that maybe we *are* foolish. Maybe the world has grown wiser than this simple tale of prophets, a star, a manger, shepherds and wise men and the birth of a messiah. And yet, *really*, is the world a better place for discarding the story and the message it brings? Is the world a kinder, more compassionate place for having outgrown the illusion of a God who so loved the world that he gave his only son?

For me, at least, I would rather live with the tenderness and love of the coming of the messiah, and the way it causes me to be a sign of love in the world. Because, in the end, for me the story of Jesus is *true*. It rings like purely rung bells in the depths of my soul. I could no more live without Jesus than air. I believe the same is true for you. Let us live the story and journey to Bethlehem. Amen.