

Isaiah 35: 1-10
Matthew 11: 2-11
December 15, 2013
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Advent

On the first Sunday of Advent the gospel lesson spoke of the future destruction of Jerusalem. Last week, we heard about the preaching of John the Baptist announcing the coming of the adult Jesus who is about to begin his ministry. Today we hear that John is in prison. He is hearing about the ministry of Jesus and the reports confuse him. In his isolation, John feels that what Jesus is saying and doing doesn't fit with the messiah he expected. Was he wrong? Is this Jesus a false messiah who is leading people astray? Since John has devoted his entire life to proclaiming the coming of the messiah and has even baptized the man who he believed was the savior of Israel, these doubts are deeply disturbing.

And so from prison he sends representatives to Jesus with this question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

This friends, is the million dollar question of Advent. The time is past when we were so sure that Jesus was and is the savior of the world that we would not be troubled by John's question. The time is past when we can smugly dismiss those of the Jewish faith as people who missed the boat. We certainly have little in common with expressions of Christianity which limit God's grace to those who agree with their interpretation of the Bible or who blindly merge the faith of Jesus with the primacy of the United States. So we wonder, is Jesus Christ truly Lord and Savior? If he is, how do we find him in this confused and confusing world of ours? How do we find him in our

confused and confusing lives? How do we answer those who believe that this Jesus stuff is just a quaint myth that often seems to do more harm than good? Is Jesus the messiah or do we look for another; or do we join a despairing world which has simply stopped looking and seeks salvation in whatever material comfort they can find?

John's question will admit no dogmatic reply. His question will not be put off by a glib quoting of the Bible. He will not be answered by a shaming response that questions his faith. In this season of light penetrating what feels like all encompassing darkness, John's question pierces to the heart of our real struggles to believe and follow Jesus with integrity.

It takes deep faith to ask John's question. It takes profound trust in the greater reality of God to dare to be this honest. Only people who trust that there is a God and that God cares for creation in general and humanity in particular journey out into the wilderness where there are no pat answers for difficult questions. Only we who are deeply moved by a reality beyond our logical comprehension can allow ourselves to be stripped of all that is spiritual anesthesia and be willing to accept what we find there. It was this same faith that led Jesus to ask from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" How could he utter those words if he did not trust at the deepest level of his being that his words were heard and he was not abandoned? It is why we believe that Jesus was asking our question. It is why John the Baptist speaks for you and me and for believers of all times and places.

So, far from being faithless people who wonder about the enduring truth of the gospel, we who dare to ask are exhibiting in fact great faith. Like the wise men who even

at this moment are following a distant star wherever it leads, we are not content to accept the substitute of manufactured light. We follow as we are able trusting in the light and believing that it shines even when dark clouds hide the star from our sight. With the wise men we bear the marks of the long and difficult journey. People along the way think we are crazy to be seeking a king beneath an ever receding star. But we are not deterred. Indeed as we separate ourselves from the illusory and temporary pleasures of the season we discover a satisfaction that we would not trade for any worldly gift.

John shows his deep faith by addressing his question *to* Jesus. By this he demonstrates that to wonder about who Jesus is or is not is not for John and abstract intellectual question. As the disciples discovered at Caesarea Philippi, there is a big difference between “Who do *people* say that I am?” and “But who do *you* say that I am?” When the identity of Jesus becomes the object of intellectual debate, there is no hope of his becoming the one who is to come. We are talking about a concept. Concepts at best are faint echoes of the reality they represent. Jesus rarely if ever reveals himself to us when we judge him according to our standards of what a messiah is. He will always accommodate himself to our ability to receive him if we honestly and sincerely seek him. Thus John in the isolation of prison is not demanding that Jesus meet his standards. He genuinely wants to know. His whole life is waiting upon Jesus’ response. This is in fact what it means to say the Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. The words express the fact that I have put the full weight of my life in the trust that he is who the Bible says he is.

Jesus recognizes and feels John's anguish. His response is tender and full of compassion: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Jesus seeks to reassure John. He does not berate John for doubting him. Instead he tells John's representatives to report on the fruits of his ministry. These fruits are nothing less than the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah which we heard this morning:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Jesus trusts that John will be reassured and confirmed in his faith. But the last thing he says is no throwaway line. Jesus himself is the model of humility. His plea that he and his ministry not be the cause of offense reveals that he is aware that he does not fit the mold. He has a sense of humor about himself. But he also is realistic. In the end nearly everyone will reject Jesus and look for another messiah.

And this the world continues to do. Yet this morning we gather with all of our questions. But I suspect that our questions are less demands for proof than pleas for reassurance. We are not putting Jesus to the test. We are recognizing that in this world faith is always under threat and we need our Lord to help us to seek his peace which the world cannot give. It is not weakness to recognize our dependence on Jesus. Indeed it is a sign of immense depth and strength that, with the unrelenting pull of the world we continue to follow him and to live his life in the world. Amen.