

SERMON
Becky A. Hebert
Are You the One?"
December 12, 2010
3rd Sunday in Advent, Favorite Carol Sunday
St. John's Chapel UCC

Matthew 11: 2-11

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

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What then did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

SERMON

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” What in the world has happened to John the Baptist that he would send his disciples to ask such a thing? John has devoted his life to preparing the way of the Lord and making his path straight. Just last Sunday, John was standing waist deep in the Jordan River when he saw Jesus wading out to him. He seemed certain enough about who Jesus was then, even tried to change places with him. “I need to be baptized by you,” he said, as Jesus insisted John baptize him. John, who was there when the heavens opened and the spirit of God descended upon Jesus like a dove, as a voice from heaven proclaimed who Jesus was to anyone in earshot. “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” What’s gotten in to John that he would ask such a thing? Has he lost his memory or been brainwashed? What has happened to make him question the identity of the one for which he has waited so long?

Well, for one thing he’s been arrested and put in jail because he offended Herod’s wife by publicly acclaiming that he disapproved of Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife. John’s got time on his hands to think about how nothing is going the way he imagined it.

The Messiah was supposed to change things; remove from power the likes of Herod. He was supposed to divide the good from the bad and get people like John out of jail. As he sat there in prison waiting, he began to wonder. His disciples brought him reports that this Jesus talks more about peace and love than about sin and hell. He hangs out with all the misfits of society—people with whom a king would never be hobnobbing. John feared he had made a terrible mistake. What he saw that day at the Jordan was back there in chapter 3, and we are now at chapter 11. Time passed, and with the passage of time, events beyond explanation; the mind

begins to rationalize these figments of the imagination...especially during time passed in jail, in isolation.

Nikos Kazantzakis (Ka zen za kis) has this scene in *The Last Temptation of Christ* where Jesus and John are sitting together in the hollow of a rock. They have been arguing all night. From a distance and you can see John's stern face. His arms are going up and down, chopping like an axe. Jesus' face radiates love and his eyes, compassion. The camera comes in close when Jesus says to John, "Isn't love enough?"

"No," John answers angrily, "The tree is rotten. God called me and gave me the ax, which I then placed at the roots of the tree. I did my duty. Now you do yours: Take the ax and strike!"

"If I were fire, I would burn, if I were a woodcutter, I would strike; but I am a heart, and I love," Jesus replies.

It's really not hard to understand what John's going through, **for at one time or another, we've all been there—expecting a Savior that doesn't come, at least not the Messiah we hoped to see birthed.** I've pretty well stopped expecting him to beat up the play ground bully at school. My mother or someone told me somewhere along the line that God takes care of those who take care of themselves, so I tried to beat up the play ground bully figuring God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit would help out. I had never fought before in my life and have not since. Sam, the biggest kid in my class, was the one to walk over and pull the tormentor off me saying, "Becky, what are you trying to do?" I figured he was my God-sent savior and could not understand for the longest why he **didn't beat the dickens out of the one who was making our lives miserable.** All he did was stand there daring the trouble maker to make a move. I wanted a savior who would severely punish the wicked. Instead, I got this huge teddy bear of a guy.

I've even prayed for Jesus to reach out and keep me from doing such a poor job of **managing my life**. I have willed him to take over my body and mind. I wanted a Messiah who heals me in spite of myself, who would not let me make any more mistakes. I've even tried to convince him to do that for the whole wide world. Putting people in charge has clearly proved to be a big mistake.

I know I'm not alone on this one. I want a Messiah who will **give me clear and helpful answers to all my questions**, and equip me with the best ever GPS that clearly tells me where I am to go with my life. But alas, none of these seem to be the Messiah we get. Instead, we get one who patiently waits for us to find our own answers; who lets the guilty have a second chance (heck, seventy times seven chances!), but one who refuses to take charge of our lives. And so we sit, simmering in the confines of our cells, our limited lives—until the day we text message our Messiah: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

And Jesus answers without even using the “I” pronoun. He says, “What do 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.”

No chopping axe or overtaking power with force...just broken people being made whole, sick given healing miracles, lifeless dead being revived, and the poor given hope. Not much, really, when you were hoping for a Messiah to beat **the dickens out of the ones who are making our lives miserable**, or one **who at least manages our lives** for us, or **gives us clear and helpful answers to all our questions**, or puts us completely out of harm's way where nothing bad could ever happen to us again. But alas, all we get is...broken being made whole...the sick receiving miracles...the dead come alive...and the poor filled with hope.

Edmund Sears was in that kind of mood one Christmas. As he tried to write his Christmas Eve sermon he struggled with how he was to write about the Prince of light and peace coming into the world. He was having a terrible time lifting himself above the depressing scenes of poverty of his time. Then he was struck with Luke's account of the angels of God hovering over the shepherds. He quickly jotted down a five-verse poem that came to him. He called it "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." Eventually, it was turned into a carol.

I have heard it and sung it so many times while hearing the social implication and misery it addresses. "Still through the cloven skies they come with peaceful wings unfurled, and still their heavenly music floats O'er all the weary world. Above its sad and lowly plains they bend on hovering wings. And ever o'er its Babel sounds the blessed angels sing. And ye, beneath life's crushing load whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and show. Look now! For glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing: O rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing."

Are you the one or should we wait for another? Are you the one of whom angels sung...who can turn even grief, poverty, illness and out-in-out misery into joy?—not with force, but with love and compassion?

Is this the Messiah we are hoping to see born this Christmas?