

That's OK, I'll Wait

Third Sunday of Advent

Matthew 11:2-11 Isaiah 35:1-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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As you've heard many times, one of the hallmarks of what is called progressive Christianity is the willingness to question the answers traditionally given by the church over the centuries concerning understandings of church doctrine and biblical interpretation. This is the starting point of the curriculum we are now discussing in our Adult Church School class, entitled, *Living the Questions: An Introduction to Progressive Christianity*.

In connection with this morning's gospel reading from Matthew 11, we are faced with one of the questions that many of us have asked, and some, understandably, are still somewhat fearful to ask. It is the very question that John the Baptist, while in prison, sent some of his own disciples to ask Jesus. **"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"** (Matt. 11:3).

I don't know about you, but I find it somewhat reassuring to realize someone as faithful as John the Baptist had doubts and uncertainties as to who this Jesus of Nazareth really was, even after his experience of baptizing Jesus. It's comforting because many, many people of faith today, perhaps yourself, also struggle with doubts and uncertainties concerning Jesus, or perhaps more specifically when expressed as Jesus Christ. During this Advent season as we prepare to celebrate Christmas Day, it is especially important for you to reflect upon your own understanding of this person named Jesus. John the Baptist's own experience reminds us that no one is immune from doubt. And unlike what some may teach or believe, **doubt is not the same as unbelief. For the very experience of doubt often fuels our own search for understanding, and our own quest to experience the Sacred Presence of God within us and in our midst.**

Here in our biblical story, then, Jesus is faced with the question, "Are you the one who is to come or should we wait for another?" It's very important to notice that Jesus did not come out and simply declare, "Yes, I am the Messiah, as foretold by the prophets of old." Even though that is the traditional church answer, it's not Jesus' answer! Instead, **he answers John's question in terms not of what someone should believe about him, but rather in relation to what people have heard and seen for themselves.** Jesus replied, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." In other words, look at the evidence, see for yourself, and come to your own conclusion.

Put most simply, according to Matthew, the person who would come as the Messiah would be a liberator. For many, however, Jesus just didn't fit their expectations of what the Messiah should be and do. And that includes John the Baptist. John himself had prophesied that the one who was coming would carry a "winnowing fork...in his hand" to separate the wheat from the chaff (Matt. 3:11-12). Yes, John the Baptist was a fire and brimstone apocalyptic kind of guy. John looks and he listens, but he sees no fire

and brimstone, no uprooting and destruction, no separating of the wheat from the chaff. **Every indication is that John's wariness and doubt grow out of the fact that Jesus has not lived up to his expectations.** Nor, for that matter, the expectations of Judaism at that point in history.

What Jesus did, then, was to make it necessary for people to redefine their definition of a messiah. Therefore, perhaps Jesus' greatest contribution to world religion was to redirect the understanding of the nature and character of God – presenting a God who is now more clearly seen as one of love, justice, forgiveness, grace, and transformation – as one who promises to make all things new. We, too, then, must be careful not to insist that the messiah, the Christ, meet and match our own personal expectations, but rather, represent God's expectations. For **we tend to anticipate and expect what we want out of a Lord and Savior, and not necessarily what God offers.** When we do, we sometimes miss the signs that could actually lead us to the freedom, transformation, and liberation that God, as understood through Jesus, offers.

Jesus tell us that the signs to recognize the Presence and work of God today can be found anytime you, I, or anyone else moves from despair to hope, from indifference to compassion, from ignorance to understanding. That Presence can be found anytime we move into new life and new beginnings, to wellness, and to emotional and spiritual wholeness. If you ever “hear and see” these kinds of movement (and have not we all?), then you have experienced the Presence of God. You have witnessed the work of Christ.

So, John the Baptist's question is indeed the same question many of us are asking today, “Was Jesus really the one?” In seeking greater clarity to this all-important question, especially at this time of year when we are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, I offer the following for you to consider if Jesus is the One.

- Through what we learn in scripture about Jesus, is he the one through whom you most fully understand the nature and character of God?
- In other words, do you consider Jesus to be the decisive, but not necessarily the only, revelation of God, and your window or door to the divine?
- If so, does this understanding of God work to set you free to become what God has created and called you to be?
- To put it another way, does the life and ministry and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth represent to you the purposes of God, thus becoming the visible representation of the invisible will of God, and therefore ushering in the realm and kin-dom of God in the here and now?

Speaking personally, since I answer “Yes” to these questions, I can affirm the vow I took at my ordination (a vow taken by all deacons, ruling elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church), and which all people are asked to affirm when becoming a member in our denomination, “Do you trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?” That perhaps could be rephrased, **“Is Jesus the One?”** When I answer that question, with integrity, “Yes!” that's quite a different understanding than what traditional church orthodoxy dictates one must *believe* about Jesus when making that claim. If making that claim has been a stumbling block for you to answer in the

affirmative, then in all seriousness, perhaps it would be helpful for us to have a conversation.

The answer Jesus himself gave to John the Baptist is indeed, therefore, the same answer for us today. What do you hear and see? Are there signs of new life, transformation and liberation breaking into our world of injustice and oppression? Are there signs breaking into the life of this community of faith, breaking into your life and the life of your family? Yet remember, we are still living in the in-between time of the now and the not yet.

As you and I continue to prepare to celebrate the mystery and joy of Christmas Day, look at the evidence and come to your own conclusion. And like John the Baptist, all of us will have to respond on the basis of what each of us hear and see. That reminds me of the hymn, "Open my eyes that I may see...Open my ears that I may hear..."

But wait, you ask, the title of this sermon is, "**That's OK, I'll Wait**" for another. Where did that come from? If we take all the New Testament to heart, we learn that following Jesus is no joke. It isn't the easy way (as found in the gospel reading) of wearing soft robes and being shaken by the wind. **Those early disciples, as well as ourselves, may have preferred to keep waiting for another messiah – maybe one that wouldn't challenge them, and us, quite so much.** As the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow comments on this gospel passage, "The disciples and we are being invited into a new reality. They and we have waited long enough, and now our waiting has revealed new ways of seeing and navigating the world! So now we must make a choice: do we follow Christ into this new reality?" Or, would we rather wait for something less demanding than the way of Jesus?

Reyes-Chow reflects, "As I think about these things for myself, I wonder if sometimes my "self-care" can turn into an idolization of that which is easy and comfortable. **Self-care is vital, but we must take care that we do not put so much stock in comfortable things that we fail to see the disruptive nature of Christ's acts in the world.** Again, this is not a call to burn out or overfunctioning, but rather a challenge to find ways to remain open to the ways that Jesus walks into our lives, lets us know about ways that God is active in the world, and calls us to follow in faith."

During this season of learning to wait well, ponder what it is you, and we together as a community of faith, are waiting for, and especially what we are waiting for spiritually. How might we all be more open and ready to hear and see the ways Christ may be calling us to follow.

Amen.