

“What Are You Waiting For?”

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First Presbyterian Church
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**Old Testament Lesson - Isaiah 35:1-6
New Testament Lesson - Matthew 11:2-11**

Henri Nouwen tells about some friends of his who had a trapeze act called the Flying Roudellas. They told Nouwen of the special relationship between “flyer” and “catcher” on the trapeze: The flyer is the one who lets go, and the catcher is the one who catches. As the flyer swings high above the crowd, the moment comes when he must let go. As he arcs out into the air, his job is to remain as still as possible and wait for the strong hands of the catcher to pluck him from midair. The flyer must never try to catch the catcher. The flyer must wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him, but he must wait.

As John waits for the Messiah, his trust seems less than absolute. (Prison can do that to a person.) I mean, notice how John asks the question about Jesus, not as the confident prophet who had baptized Jesus, but as an ordinary Judean awaiting deliverance from the Messiah. And when John asks “are we to wait for another,” he asks on behalf of all people. “Are we to wait?”

It’s a question we ask during Advent. And it’s a question Matthew asks throughout the gospel. He links the words of the Hebrew prophets to the acts of Jesus. And in doing so, Matthew challenges us to ask, “is Jesus the one we’ve waited for?” And how are we to wait? This challenge is never clearer than when Jesus asserts his divine power over the forces of evil, or when we allow contrary forces to block us from Jesus’ power and presence in our lives.

When we’re struggling to balance our hectic schedules – or those of the children or grandchildren – against a desire to instill family values and maintain important traditions, when pulled in several directions like that, we’re challenged to ask if it’s really Jesus we’re waiting for. Just how good a job of waiting are we doing?

Surely, having “family time” about once a month is enough. Doesn’t church every other Sunday count? Maybe, maybe not. That’s our challenge – to decide if Jesus is the one we’re waiting for, or have we thrown our allegiance – aligned our lives – *behind someone or something else.*

Is it really Jesus we keep in our hearts, expectantly, and on our minds, thoughtfully? And if not, what is it that has the most influence over

how we order our days, what we say to our loved ones, how we spend our time, talents and treasures.

Preacher John Ortberg recalls taking his children to, what he calls, "the shrine of the Golden Arches," where the kids would lust for the Happy Meal and its little toy surprise – the treasure it promises them. Ortberg admits to trying to "outbid McDonalds" in its ability to sell his children a little slice of happiness, along with chicken nuggets and fries on the side.

He'd tell the kids to order only the food, and then he'd give them a quarter to buy a little toy on their own. But instead, the cry would go up, "I want a Happy Meal," and people throughout the restaurant would crane their necks to see what type of parent would deny their child a meal of such great joy. Ortberg says the problem with the Happy Meal is the "happy" wears off, and the kids need another fix. Happy Meals says Ortberg bring happiness only to McDonalds. (Which they've learned, they don't even have Happy Meals anymore.)

As adults, our world is full of hollow, "Happy Meal promises." We are tantalized by the promise of a new car, a bigger house, star-athlete kids, designer clothing or accessories or gadgets, and whatever else it was for you that recently gave you just a moment of pause before you jumped in with both feet.

And it's not only outer, worldly temptations that have us waiting on something other than Jesus, following a false Messiah, serving something other than God. Often times we've neglected to get close enough to Jesus spiritually to even know when to wait, and we find ourselves running from one quick fix to another, only to be left "in a fix of our own making," with no one to turn to.

The Gospel declares much promise in drawing near to Jesus, and much danger in overlooking his power and presence in our lives. And it's clear that we are given this choice in life, that Jesus will not force himself on us. No, the true blessing of Advent is that as much as we profess to wait for Jesus, it's really Jesus who is waiting for us. Jesus waits for us to witness his power and presence in the world, and to respond faithfully according to whom it is that we follow, the true King of kings and Lord of lords.

But for John the Baptizer, in our reading for today, sitting in prison, sitting where he is – and perhaps for us sitting where we of are – *it can be hard to see Jesus* active in the world. While Jesus preached love thy neighbor as thy self, the world is becoming increasingly us vs. them, those with money and means getting richer while the poor are getting poorer? We can look at the world around us and see this reality. It's an all too valid sight for anyone paying attention these

days. For some, poverty, ill health, family squabbles – it's all they can see in life.

But for those who can see beyond the walls of our self-made prisons – the prisons of social injustice and an uncertain faith – for those who can see through these barriers to the truth, a new day is indeed dawning. Christ is coming into the world, anew, everyday.

But it's not so for John the Baptizer. John is in prison, held captive by Herod Antipas, King of Judea. And sitting in prison, his career over, facing an uncertain future that he must have known could end with his untimely death, John hears about what Jesus is doing and asks the question. Who are you? Do we really know you? Are you who we think you are? Are you doing the right things? Can we trust in you? Ever had questions like that before?

We don't know what was behind John's question. But there does seem to be a certain discontent for John when it comes to Jesus. They lived very different lives, after all. John was very much of the world, and militantly opposed to its most frivolous trappings. So he fled to the wilderness in his rough, camel's hair clothing.

While Jesus, he was a man of the people. He had a rich community life of family, friends and followers. He dined at wedding banquets, was asked to dinner by government officials, ate his fill of fish and loaves, and wore a comfortable tunic – all the while maintaining and affirming his spiritual identity. Unlike John, Jesus had this divine knack of living in the world but not of the world. John and Jesus, these two cousins began life so intricately connected, and now John, despite his best and most faithful efforts, seems certain that his life is turning out quite different from that of Jesus of Nazareth. Of course John doesn't have the full picture. Christ had not yet risen where John is sitting. And so this wilderness prophet begins to feel the prison walls closing in.

But, had John had the full picture, had he been certain of who Jesus is, he might have seen through those prison walls to Jesus' promise and glory. This is John's challenge – to see God's glory when it's nowhere in sight. And that's our challenge, too, in the uncertain moments of our lives, to see Jesus' promise and glory and to trust in that, make our decisions based on our faith in God.

We all find ourselves stuck in the wilderness from time to time. Probably not the wilderness of prison like John – though for some of us, imprisonment of spirit, if not body, is a familiar feeling. But generally, our wilderness experiences come when we realize we've become prisoners of our own social identities, certain that our self image and social standing are more important than our integrity or the

promises we make, that our own needs and wants are more important than our ability to love the unlovable – the driver who drives you crazy, the cashier who can't work the cash drawer, the family member who wants out of the family, the coworker who doesn't work, the classmate who has no class.

Encountering "unlovable people" such as these – especially at this hectic time of year – can drive us right into the wilderness. And in that spiritual wilderness we forget that God's promise and glory are for everyone, particularly those we find most unlovable. What do we do at such moments in our lives?

When John lost sight of Jesus because of the prison walls that surrounded him, John sent word for a little reassurance. And what does Jesus send back? **His Word.** Jesus says to John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you have heard and seen; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear..." With these words, Jesus speaks volumes. With these words, Jesus speaks as God spoke 800 years earlier, through the prophet Isaiah.

In our OT reading today, Isaiah foretells of a time when "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." Jesus is saying to John, yes, I am the redeemer heralded by the OT prophets. And then he adds one more word of his own: "Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." Sounds to me almost like a challenge to John.

I'm here, the guy who I am; and you're there, the guy who you are, and take no offense at that. John may have preached about a Messiah who would baptize by fire – heating things up to separate out the social impurities of life – but Jesus lives as a healer of body and soul, sent to the meek and the lowly. And that's not what John – or the people of Israel – were waiting for.

The Israelites and the earliest Christians had others who performed healing miracles before Jesus. Elisha had both cleansed a leper and raised a boy from death. The first-century Judeans weren't waiting for another healer; they wanted a conqueror.

But that's not who they got – and it's not who we have in Jesus either. Jesus is not someone who will make all your troubles go away, but rather someone who will draw near to you in the face of those troubles. And that's something that is truly freeing in life, a gift worth seeking, no matter where it's found or how much time and energy and sacrifice it takes.

So the question for us is, **which Jesus are we waiting for?** Are we waiting for Jesus to make our lives perfect, and then angry with God when they're not. Or do we accept Jesus into our lives – even as imperfect as they are; accept that Jesus is with us, guiding us and strengthening us?

How you answer that question makes a difference. It makes a difference in how we live our lives, in what we wait for, what we count on in life. Jesus is waiting for us. What is it that we are waiting for; what is it that we count on in life?

PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful God, we are bombarded with information, all of it claiming to be the truth. Yet we know that there are false messiahs among us – those who seek to use and exploit rather than serve, those who are after only their own gain, those who distort, twist and stretch the truth to suit their own purposes.

Our public discourse has been reduced to sound bites. Our relationships are often no deeper than what can be tweeted in 140 characters or posted to a Facebook page.

Into this shallow and hollow vacuum, you come as the Way, the Truth and the Life. Fill our lives and our world with your glory. And let us, in response, return again and again to the fountain of eternal truth from which we may drink and be filled.

We pray all this in the name of the one you sent to set us free, Jesus Christ, who taught us raise our voices in prayer, as together we sing:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but
deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.