

## Who Are You Jesus?

You can imagine what people were telling John about Jesus, as John sat in Herod's jail, getting bits and pieces from family and friends who brought him food and blankets.

John had put it all on the line, railing about axes and roots; turning stones into Abraham's kids and tossing the religious mucky mucks, like so much chaff, into the furnace.

And Jesus?

"Hey John, get this! At a wedding in Cana, the idiot hosts ran out of wine halfway through the party! Jesus took the foot washing water and turned it into gallons of the best stuff anybody ever tasted! The party went on for three more days!"

"Then, get this John, that smelly blind beggar who yelled at everyone at the town gate – Jesus made a mud patty with his spit, slapped it on the fellow's eyes, and now he can see!" And that skin diseased person we threw out of town? He ran into Jesus, and his skin looks fresh as a baby's bottom!"

"He's forgiving tax collectors and hookers their sins without even waiting for them to repent; he's eating with them too!"

"He even healed that Roman soldier's slave!"

"John, you told *us* to get our act together; but Jesus says *God* is saving our skins.

And just last night, there he was, partying up with Bernie Madoff, and that radical Muslim Imam, and even the guy from Wiki Leaks was there!"

"John, here's the question: 'Were you *CRAZY* when you said this guy's the Messiah?'"

So John sends a friend to ask:

“Are you the one, or should we wait for someone else?”

And Jesus says: “You tell John what you’ve seen around here. Tell him there are people who’ve sold their seeing-eye dogs and taken up bird watching. Tell him there are people who’ve traded their aluminum walkers for hiking boots. Tell him the ‘down and out’ are now the ‘up and coming’ and a lot of deadbeats are living it up for the first time in their lives. Tell him; and three cheers for the one who can swallow all this without gagging.” [Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, 79].

Jesus is not the expected Messiah, not even to John, the greatest of all prophets.

Such is the scandal of God. Such is the shock of God.

Such is the mind numbing surprise of the God who chooses to enter our history, through the womb of an unwed teen, in an insignificant colony of the world’s greatest empire.

It’s why John, the greatest of all the prophets, *is least* in the Kingdom of Heaven, because even this great prophet **sees only dimly**, **hears only faintly**, the marvelous dance God has undertaken for his people. A dance that looks past the outward displays, into the innermost regions of the heart. A dance that shakes **not only** souls, but civilizations to their roots.

A dance that, at the end of the day, knows we can’t do it ourselves, so God has done it for us; asking only that, as we face each other, we remember what God has done for us; and in the remembering, to be gentle with one another.

The wilderness that Jesus was bringing to life, by strengthening weak hands, firming up feeble knees and encouraging the “heart sick” to “fear not”, it is a wilderness we each of us know well.

If you're married, you live in that wilderness from time to time, when nothing seems to go right, when there is only parched misunderstanding, dry resentments, withered hopes.

If you've lost a job or felt betrayed or victimized by the seemingly senseless cruelty that life so randomly inflicts, you've lived in that wilderness. If your body is giving up on you with illness or age, you live in that wilderness.

I keep remembering 10 year old Patreace, dying of brain cancer.

Parched deserts don't get dryer than that; and yet we all know, sadly, they do.

From John's prison, and each of us, in our own way, from our own prisons, the question goes out:

"Are you the one, or should we wait for someone else?"

Our broader culture, of course, is waiting for someone else. Our broader culture still yearns for that warrior king, who will kill all the bad guys and take us safely home. Folks who want to paint the cross Red White and Blue have no idea who the God of Jesus is.

Our annual Christmas celebration, out there, is a long way from the upside down savior that John had his questions about.

Every December, out there, we re-consecrate, we re-bless, our consumer society's obsession with things in an orgy of buying. That's Christmas in our broader culture.

Compare that with Lt Gerald Coffee who spent 7 years as a POW in North Viet Nam. During his second Christmas in that rotten hellhole of a camp, he made an amazing discovery.

Stripped of all that defined him: his rank, his uniform, money, family and friends; alone in a tiny cramped cell, in a far country, he began to focus on the simplicity of Christ's birth.

While afraid and lonely, this Christmas is the most meaningful to him, because, for the first time, naked before God, he understands the mystery of Christmas, of God coming to us, naked.

“Are you the one, or should we wait for someone else?”

The answer from Jesus is always the same.

Not “yes’ or “no”, but “follow me.”

You see, John prepared the way for Jesus. But it wasn’t the way that John expected. John perhaps was hoping that with his winnowing fork, with that raised axe, Jesus would free John from jail.

Instead, Jesus followed John into the jail cell; and to the executioner’s block; followed him right to death, did he.

Perhaps John, like you and I, had hoped for a holy way out of suffering, a holy way out of the hard work that relationships require; a holy way out of life too often random and cruel; a holy way out of aging and illness; a holy way out of a society that turns its back on the least among us.

Jesus shows us that there is no holy way out.

“Follow me in,” he says. “Into the cell, onto the cross, follow me in.”

“If you want to get out,” Jesus says, “come in”.

We often live our lives in the wilderness. It sometimes seems “our whole life happens within its silent void, on its arid slopes that drain the life from us as we wander in circles, learning the same old lessons over and over.” (Neider, Christian Century, 11/30/04, 19).

Yet this is the same wilderness that will one day bloom!

"For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,

and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water...."

It is **our** wilderness that will bloom, and the life of Jesus among us is the first fruit of that blooming. What has first touched only a few, will redeem all; what lasted for only a little while, will go on and on forever and ever!

This is the promise of Advent. This is our hope!

Sitting in John's cell, or sitting in our own, it seems there is no way out. Yet ours is a God who is a master at making a way out of no way.

God makes a way out of no way when, following Jesus, we slowly come to learn to "**conquer** by *yielding*; to **rule** by *servicing*; to become **great** by becoming *small*; to gain **wisdom** by becoming *fools* for Christ." [Feasting on the Word, 64].

Such is the way that John prepared; only he couldn't quite get it. But don't laugh at John. For most of our lives, it's a way we don't get either.

That's why we gather week in and week out; so that with constant remembering, constant practice, we slowly but surely gain a foothold in the new world our God is making. It's slippery business. We need to hang on tight to each other; as God hangs on tight to our whole motley crew.

We wait in hope for the day when Aunty Gertrude's back is straight as an arrow again; when Uncle Walter is once again kicking up his heels, when Kalfred Yee runs the mile and isn't even out of breath; when young Patreace jumps for joy!

We wait for the day when all of our blessed dead are once more at our side, healed, restored, alive!

This is the hope of Advent! This is the promise of the God of Advent. All that is ill, all that is infirm, all that is hurting, all of it will be taken up and transformed, made new, made free! And in the meantime, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, our Lord beckons us to begin to live *as if it is already so*.

Are you the one, or shall we wait for someone else?

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."

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