

The Unexpected Messiah

You all know the backstory of John the Baptist.

How his mother Elizabeth, for whom our church is named, has a visit from Mary, the mother of Jesus, while both are still pregnant.

Even in the womb, John knows who Jesus is.

The years pass and John goes out to the Jordan to baptize and when Jesus comes to him, John sees the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus and again, John knows exactly who Jesus is.

But today, alone and afraid in Herod's dark dungeon, John is not so sure.

He doubts.

He sends his friends to ask: are you the one or is somebody else coming?

A few years ago we did bulletin inserts that included helpful little summaries of the readings.

And the insert for this particular reading said that it isn't John who has doubts about Jesus, it's his disciples!

Which is a sad and hilarious thing to suggest.

Sad because we seem to have an institutional bias against doubt – which leads many good people to beat themselves up when doubts arise.

Hilarious because the text itself tells us it's John himself who's in deep doubt.

There's nothing wrong with doubt, in fact, it's unavoidable if you're serious about following Jesus!

Doubt is the fertilizer of all genuine faith.

Here's why....

We're born into this world and through a combination of instinct and education, we're taught about "the way things are."

We're taught to protect ourselves, that the world is harsh and unforgiving, that we always need to be on guard.

With that image of the world comes the image of a harsh and angry God, and many live in great fear of judgment.

But the God of holy Scripture, and the life of Jesus, tell us that what we experience as "reality" is actually an illusion, that the purpose of faith is to take us from a life of fiction to a life of fact..... of unlearning what we think we know.....

This unlearning starts with Isaiah today, when the prophet says, "Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you!"

To hear these words with the ears we are born with is to hear an angry God on his way to smite his enemies.

That's how the people of Jesus' day hear it, that's how many hear it today, proving the point that our **image** of God is often our greatest obstacle to knowing who God really is.

Today, John is stuck in that trap, because John too expects sword-bearing angels and fiery bombast....making the healing ministry of Jesus, and his fine dining with scalawags, so odd, so unexpected....

When Isaiah says that God saves us through vengeance and terrible recompense, what we discover is that it's not God who puts us on trial, but we who put God on trial, as Jesus bears the awful brunt of **our vengeance**; and endures the terrible recompense of **our violence**, and by enduring these things, defeats them, with love and mercy and forgiveness.

So that when Isaiah says, when Jesus says, that the "blind see" and the "deaf hear" and the "lame leap," it's not so much about the physically blind, deaf and lame, but about our collective blindness and deafness and lameness in understanding the true nature of God.

Who actually believes that God is mercy and compassion and kindness?

Only when we are finally transformed to see this truth, then indeed something like scales fall from our eyes and plugs are yanked from our ears and the weights that

weigh us down are lifted and we suddenly are free to see the world and creation and each other in an entirely new light....

If compassion is the ultimate ground of all being, everything changes!

No wonder Jesus sends John's disciples on their way saying: "Blessed are they who take no offense at me...."

Because there is something in this fallen nature of ours that hates compassion, that is offended by love and kindness and mercy.

Inside every human being is a twisted something that thrills at the idea of violence, finds joy in revenge, that loves judging others as unworthy.

Some say: "That may be true for others, but not for me!"

And yet our love affair with revenge and violence and judgment is proved every time we are urged to adopt a social policy that says no to war; that insists that wealth be not hoarded but shared; that forgives wrongs committed by those who wish us ill.

We universally respond by saying....

"All that God stuff is fine and dandy on Sunday morning, but it doesn't work in real life!"

We've all heard it; we've all said it, if not out loud, then in our hearts.

Which is why we so often paganize our faith.

We have exchanged the God of the Covenant for the god of Plato, the Greek philosopher.

We prefer the after-life of Plato to the change Jesus demands here and now.

Perhaps you noticed that in today's readings, which are all about redemption and salvation and life in God's kingdom, there's not a single word about heaven.

The salvation that God promises begins here, in God's good creation:

"The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind;
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down....."

This isn't pie in the sky in the sweet by and by, it's liberation from all that imprisons us here, now, today!

In Jesus, heaven and earth intersect, and when we follow him, when we consume his body and blood, we too begin to live in that intersection, and it is in that place that we join with God's purpose in making this creation into something new and beautiful, into the apple of God's eye, as it was always intended to be.

So, we who claim Jesus as Lord reject violence, we reject war, we reject judgment....we embrace mercy and compassion and kindness, even if it means being called naive or stupid, even if it leads to death, because Jesus is the true messiah, because he gives us, at long last, the power through weakness to bring God's Reality into this redeemed world.

At last, our illusions are shattered, and with Flannery O'Connor we too can say: "

"...it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws..... [Never forget] the emphasis the Church puts on the body. It's not the soul she says that will rise..... but the body, glorified."

Do you doubt these things?

Of course we do!

Yet, as we unlearn our illusions, and peel away the fictions that keep us separated from the love of God, as we learn, ever so slowly, and often only through the experience of pain and loss, what is indeed true, doubt will always be our walking companion, but he need not dominate the conversation.

I end with this story, told by an old rabbi.

"My father once said to me that the seeing of God is not like the seeing of man.

Man sees only between the blinks of his eyes.

He doesn't know what the world is like **during** the blinks.

People see the world in fragments.

But the master of the universe sees the world whole.

The world is good, it is our seeing that is broken." The Gift of Asher Lev.
(paraphrased).

So today, gather up all of your doubts, all of your own brokenness, and with John's friends, ask our Lord the crucial question:

"Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?"

And then listen well as Jesus assures us all, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor receive good news.

And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

+amen