

University Hill Congregation
Aaron Miller – December 11, 2016

It's hard to blame John the Baptist. He'd been faithful to a fault, he'd lived a life of holiness and devotion to God, never drinking wine and eating bugs to show his commitment. And he'd spent what I have to assume were some of the best preaching years of his life, yelling himself hoarse about the coming of the Messiah--the coming of the One who would bring about God's reign of justice, love and righteousness; the One who would set things right, consuming spiritual deadwood and useless religious chaff with the unquenchable fire of the Holy Spirit, wherever he went. John had been the prophet God asked him to be, that he was born to be! He'd made the way as ready for the Lord as he could.

And when Jesus showed up at the river bank, and somehow John knew that this was the One they'd all been waiting for--the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world--he'd even baptized him, and he'd heard the voice from heaven. He knew the voice wasn't thunder rumbling, like some said it was. It was confirmation that this guy, this Jesus, was (unlikely as it seemed) the True King after God's own heart. Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. The One God's people had been waiting for, just about forever.

But then, maybe he'd gotten caught up in the excitement of his own preaching--he really could turn a phrase, after all. Maybe he'd heard what he wanted to hear when Jesus came sputtering out of the water. Maybe he'd been a bit too enthusiastic: surely Jesus was a good and holy man (though, his disciples were a questionable lot, and his table company was not always becoming of God's Anointed), but perhaps he was simply the next great prophet and not the world's once-for-all Saviour.

Because not much seems to have changed since Jesus arrived on the scene. There hasn't been exactly a tidal wave of divine justice. Not a ton of unquenchable fire. Not to mention that John, prophet of God, is now wasting away in prison for having suggested a bit too loudly that perhaps Herod, the local ruler and Roman lackey, ought not to have shacked up with his own sister-in-law. And so, he sends a message to Jesus, asking him what's up.

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

We don't need to wonder about John's particular emotional state in order to understand that whatever he thought was going to happen when God acted to establish his kingdom and set the world right-side-up, this isn't it. Whoever he thought he was preparing the way for, Jesus was falling a bit short of his expectations.

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that this passage underlines the fact that, although we use the title *Jesus Christ* almost reflexively, it has always been a title that is hard won. *Matthew* tells us that Jesus is the Christ, but apparently, for John, the jury is still out. As it was for any number of Jesus' contemporaries who were keeping a curious, or skeptical eye on him. As it has been throughout history, and is for many people today. In fact, I doubt there has ever been any *believer* who hasn't, at some point, wondered if Jesus really is the One who comes finally and fully in the name of the Lord, to reconcile and make all things new.

Truth be told, I take an odd kind of solace from the image of John the Baptist, sitting--bound and dejected--in his prison cell, wondering if maybe he got it wrong. On this side of Easter, having seen Jesus vindicated in resurrection, I think we have a slight advantage over the wilderness prophet. But even so, in this season when we're waiting again, waiting *still* for all things to be made new, still waiting for that

day when every tear is wiped away and every belly filled, still waiting for all of creation to be healed, it's not a bad thing to let ourselves sit with John, aware of our own chains, our own walls, our own disappointments, and wonder just who Jesus is. Who is this one we celebrate; who is this one we're waiting for? Is he the *One*, or should we wait for another.

Now, I don't want to extol the virtues of doubt, too much. There's certainly room for it in our faith. We can know, perhaps we should know, what it's like to cry out with the desperate man in Luke's gospel: "I believe! Lord, help my unbelief!" But the unexpected truth is that real struggles of faith are often evidence that we're dealing with God, not some being or idea that we've fashioned after our own likeness. In the end, St. Paul reminds us, faith--that deep trust and love that we followers of Jesus are called to--is a gift; we can only receive it, sometimes in spite of ourselves.

And so, I think that there's great hope for us when we sit with John. On the one hand, it's a beautiful reminder that we're not alone when we wonder about the ways and means of God. But it's also a healthy reminder, perhaps especially at this time of year, when it's tradition and familiarity that we crave and delight in, that the God who comes among us in Jesus, the God who will be God With Us, is a God whose arrival confounds our expectations of what a saviour of the world will be like, in just about every way we can come up with.

Which means that, along with consolation and hope, it is a risk to let John's words take shape in our own mouths. John is ready for the truth, whether it fits his expectations or not. When he asks Jesus if he's the one, I have to believe that he understood the risk he was taking. I have to believe that he accepted that this could go either way, and regardless of which way it went, it was going to cause him

some problems. If Jesus had sent the messengers back to confirm John's deepest fears, that he was not the Messiah, that John had jumped the gun, a lot of stuff would have unraveled for the prophet. But I have to think that the answer Jesus did send--the prophetic evidence that had captured the imaginations of so many, even as he sat in a prison cell--also caused some unraveling.

I think that kind of unravelling is what Jesus is on about after he sends John's messengers back. He turns to the crowd, to us and asks what we showed up for in the first place. Have we come for a vaguely spiritual experience, as an escape from the humdrum of the everyday--to watch a reed blow in the wind? Have we come to hear about soft robes--to have the ways of the world, the ways of the princes of the earth, our ways of life given a religious nod? Maybe. But Jesus seems to know that deep down we want more than that: we want more than a spiritual spa day, more than confirmation that everything we're doing is just fine and the way things are is good enough.

The crowds came, I dare guess that we've come (even if we only know it deep down), to hear the prophet--to be confronted by the word of God, living and active! Because we've looked around, just like they had, and we can see--even if we have to squint from where we're sitting--that the world is not what we imagined it would be. We know that all creation groans, and those groans seem to be getting louder. We can hear that every tear isn't wiped away; we can feel that every hungry belly isn't filled. We need a hope and peace and joy and love that we don't seem to be able to manufacture, no matter our best efforts. We need a God who confounds our expectations, whose ways are not our ways, and whose thoughts are not our thoughts.

At least I know that's what I need. And it seems to be what John needed. I think that's what Jesus means when he says that as a prophet, John was the greatest ever, but that prophecy isn't the be-all and end-all. There's the kingdom of heaven, which surpasses even our wildest dreams and desires, well beyond our best turns of phrase; the kingdom of heaven which will not, in the end, be hindered by prison walls--physical or spiritual. That's the hope, the thing that John's desert cries get us ready for. But Jesus is constantly reminding us that we need to move from proclaiming it, or hoping in it, or thinking about it, or agreeing to it, to receiving it--surprising and unlikely as it sometimes seems.

And then, and only then, will we begin to see and hear the stunning ways that this God comes among us; that in Jesus Christ God is not God against us and over us, but *really is* God with us and for us. That God confounds our expectations of what a god is, by emptying himself of what, by rights, should keep God far away from us. It wasn't the great theological minds of the lame and the blind, the lepers and the mute that sent them singing and dancing and praising into the world; it was the deep wonder that, as Bonhoeffer put it: "God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where we would least expect them." And I, for one, am grateful that no less than John the Baptist needed that reminder, too.

Matthew doesn't tell us how John received that reminder. He doesn't tell us whether he was martyred, singing hymns, or if he died bitterly and disappointed. There's something about that that sits uneasily with me. I'd like to have caught at least a glimpse of him doing a little dance of joy in his cell, as all his expectations of God unravel at his feet, exchanged for wonder and amazement at how this

saving and redeeming God really is. I confess that that's how I imagine the story ending. But I suppose it doesn't have to.

In any case, I don't think that's why we get the story. Let's be honest: it would have been just as easy to scrub this little incident from history, and leave John as the endlessly faithful martyr. We don't need to know that he sat there, in Herod's dungeon wondering, even doubting if Jesus really was the Messiah he'd been hoping for. I think Matthew tells us all that to bring us into the question, perhaps in spite of ourselves.

Are we preparing the way for a saviour of our own creation? Or are we ready to receive a kind of hope, peace, joy and love, a depth of forgiveness and mercy that we could never come up with on our own? Are we ready, come what may, to receive the kind of king who would be born in a stable, whose kingdom seems to come--as often as not--as silent as light; who comes not in a flood of judgment, but a steady stream of mercy that is cutting, even now, through the rock-hard heart of this world?

I mean, it's not the way I'd do it--but maybe thanks be to God for that.

And blessed are we, when we take no offense at him.

Amen.