

### ***Shall We Look for Another?***

In the name of him who gave the blind sight, made the lame walk, cleansed lepers, caused the deaf to hear, raised the dead, and – *most importantly of all* – preached the good news to the poor, dear friends in Christ: Wait. Hold on a second. Did I hear that right? Did he just say that of all those wonderful things Jesus was doing, all those fantastic miracles of healing, the *most important* thing he did was to preach the good news to the poor? Oh yes. Absolutely. I'll admit that on the surface it doesn't seem to stack up with the others. Standing there just talking isn't nearly as spectacular as using divine power to cure broken and diseased bodies; but ask yourself this: What made the most difference in the long run? The people Jesus healed and those for whom he restored lost senses were given a gift that improved their lives on this earth for a few years. The people he raised from the dead got an extension to their lives. They got to *live* a few more years—in *this vale of tears*. But the people to whom he preached the Gospel and who received his message in faith, to them he gave the gift of eternal life in Paradise. Isn't that far and away a greater work of God than the others?

Sure it is. And yet, we don't typically look at it that way, do we? We usually gravitate to the kinds of things that grant immediate relief from distress, pain, and sorrow. *That's* what we want from God. When we're in a bind, when there's something wrong in our lives, we're looking for *action* – action that produces measurable results right now instead of just ... well, just *talk* – talk that promises a great and mighty deliverance at some unspecified time in the future. We are very much creatures of the present. And because of this it's easy to fall into the trap of losing sight of the big picture: that our gracious and loving Father isn't about trying to fix all the little things that are wrong with this world cursed on account of sin. He's got a much bigger project going on: plans for a new heaven and a new earth that are free of sin and the problems that go along with it. He's got plans to make each and every one of us part of his new creation. And he is working that plan out by his Word and Spirit according to his perfect timetable step by every necessary step; which calls for patience and trust on our behalf, as well as our abandoning any number of misguided short term hopes and expectations we might have because these can lead to faith shattering disappointment when things don't work out exactly as we want them to or as we think they should.

All of which brings us to John the Baptizer and this morning's Gospel lesson. We heard from John last week. Then he was at the highpoint of his ministry. His job was to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus. He was to make ready hearts and minds to receive the Savior. And the way John did that was to show people their sin and God's terrifying judgments against them because of it. And so, when he preached the Law of God, John held nothing back. He would not have won any speaking awards for diplomacy or subtleness. He was more like a flamethrower blasting those who listened to him with a steady barrage of hellfire and brimstone. He was also a great leveler. He accused everyone equally. It didn't matter who you were or what you did. The most notorious public sinners and the most pious and religiously observant people were the same to him. He threatened them all with the all-consuming wrath of God that was soon to fall upon everyone who failed to repent, turn from their wicked ways, and place their trust in the Lord's Christ. Not surprisingly, even as it does today, the kind of preaching that John did offended a lot of people.

But this morning we heard that it's John himself who is offended. It's about a year later, and now John's public ministry is through. Interestingly enough, it's through because he was so

good at it. In his zeal to bring everyone to repentance, he had boldly denounced even the King – that would be King Herod Antipas who had left his own wife and run off with the wife of his brother, Philip. Incidentally, this sister-in-law he ran off with and married was also his niece, the daughter of a different brother; so, it really was what you might call a “family affair” all the way around. (Side note here: it’s usually at this point that I make an observation about how such irregular and multifaceted relationships are considered repugnant pretty much everywhere in the world except for in the state of Missouri where they’re quite commonplace; but I’ve been told that some people are offended by such remarks. So – because I’m such a sensitive guy – today I won’t mention it.) Anyway, King Herod didn’t like John going around saying he was an adulterer, so he threw him in the slammer in order to shut him up.

So now, for doing what God appointed him to do and having the courage to call Herod’s sin exactly what it was, John finds himself chained to a wall in the dark, stinking dungeon of the desert fortress of Machaerus. Perched on the desolate heights overlooking the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, Machaerus was a veritable hell-hole. It’s hard to imagine a worse place to be. John, as you know, had chosen a pretty austere lifestyle for himself, what with living in the desert, wearing rough clothes, and eating bugs and all; but all that was like living in the lap of luxury compared to his cell in Herod’s prison. And as the weeks and months of his very unpleasant confinement wore on, John had plenty of time to think. And most of what he thought was how he couldn’t understand what was happening. I mean, here he was: the forerunner of the Lord’s Christ. He had preached about how the Christ when he appeared would destroy the wicked, defeat evil, overthrow injustice, and set up a kingdom of everlasting righteousness. And then he had had the privilege of pointing Jesus out to people and saying, “There he is! Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

That was shortly before his arrest. And in the six or so months since then, through his disciples who continued to visit him in the prison, he’d been keeping close tabs on all that Jesus was saying and doing. And from John’s perspective what Jesus was saying and doing wasn’t making a lick of sense. Here I am unjustly rotting in this prison, and what’s Jesus doing? He’s going to wedding banquets in Cana. And what’s he using his almighty divine power to do? Make wine for the party. Maybe it’s just me, but it seems that Jesus has a problem with setting priorities. Okay, so then he goes to his hometown of Nazareth. There in the local synagogue he announces that he’s the fulfillment of the Scriptures and that he’s come to set the captives free. Great. Now we’re getting somewhere. But then what happens? His former friends and neighbors rise up as a mob and attack him. They accuse him of blasphemy and try to throw him off a cliff. He manages to escape; but he doesn’t do anything to them. He just walks away! C’mon! Where’s the wrath? Where’s the fury? Where’s God’s judgment on the wicked? And what’s he been doing since then? Is he raising an army? Is he defeating the foes and oppressors of God’s people? No. He’s gathered a handful of ragtag fishermen and a couple of others – including a tax collector (if you can believe it) – and he’s going around *talking*. Just *talking* ... about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and loving your enemies ... it’s maddening! And it seems that he’s going out of his way to avoid confrontation. I don’t get it. Why the pussyfooting around? Come to set the captives free, are you? Well, here I am! Free me!

Jesus wasn’t turning out to be whom John thought he should be. He had preached about Jesus. He had told people to get ready for his coming. And specifically, he’d said that Jesus was going to up the ante, so to speak. John said, “I baptize you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” And what John thought that meant was, “You think *I’m* tough on sin? Ha! Just wait. You ain’t seen nothing yet! When it comes to finding

and cutting out sin, I'm just a piece of sandpaper scratching the surface; the One who's coming is an axe!"

But Jesus was taking a different approach; one that John didn't expect—no, more than that. It was one that John didn't like. And it disturbed him deeply. He began to wonder if he'd been wrong. And so, it is that he sent two of his disciples to ask, "Are you really the One, or shall we look for another?"

And what I'd point out to you is that the real problem was that John, like so many others, misunderstood the most important part of Jesus' ministry and mission. A Law oriented guy like John wanted to see moral improvement on a national scale. He expected to see a wholesale return to righteousness of life, the people of God living like God's people and walking according to his commandments. John expected to see the Christ as the hammer of God that would pound people into shape by brute force and smash the wicked to pieces. That was the kingdom of God according to John. That was the kind of Christ he was looking for.

And what's interesting about that is that two thousand years later there are a lot of people looking for the same kind of Christ. The difference is that they think they've found him in the Jesus of Holy Scripture. That is to say they recast the Jesus they find in Scripture into this preconceived mold effectively making him into someone and something other than he really is.

What am I talking about? On a broad scale I'm talking about the ever-popular myth that our nation was founded by Christian men on Christian principles. It's not true. It never was. Yes, there were some Christians among the founding fathers; but most were merely deists who believed in a god of law and order. Jesus was for them a teacher of morality, a new law giver; not the Son of God and certainly not the Savior of the world. But the myth persists that our nation did so well in its first century and a half because God was blessing us for our Christian virtues. Now, the story goes, things have gone south because as a nation we've abandoned God and his Laws. The reasoning goes that if we collectively return to the Lord with all our hearts (by which they mean restoring our respect for the Law of God), then everything will come up roses again. It is on the surface a lovely thought I suppose; but when you hear people saying things like this, notice that they're always talking about other people. What they're saying is that I'm a good person who's keeping the Law of God, the problem is *those sinners over there* who are messing it up for the rest of us. They're the ones who need to get on board. They're the ones who need to be whipped into shape so that they become obedient to Christ. Friends, there's nothing Christian about a thought like that. That's simply legalism. That's the kind of Christ John was looking for, which is to say not the real Christ at all.

On a more individual and personal level, there is today much talk in evangelical circles of living what's called "the victorious life". The idea is this: you come to repentance for your sin and to faith in Christ at the beginning of your walk with God. After that, it's pretty much up to you to keep walking on the straight and narrow way. The farther you go, Jesus becomes less your Savior and more your Lord – by which they mean your taskmaster. He sets the standard; now you have to live up to it. That's how you show him your gratitude. That's how you prove that you're a disciple. And usually connected to the idea are the regular rewards and punishments. If you do well following Jesus and keeping his commands, you get blessed. If you do poorly, bad things happen to you. So, you can gauge your level of faithfulness – and that of others – by what's going on. Health, wealth, and success mean you're doing Jim-dandy. Sickness, setbacks, and accidents mean you need to make some improvements. But again, the trouble is that there's nothing Christian about this idea. It's the law of Karma. It's the pagan idea that drives Hinduism and any number of other false religions.

Behind both of these ideas, and indeed, behind John's way thinking, is the general notion that God gave us his Holy Law in order to help us and set us free from the curse of sin. The problem, it would seem, is that we didn't know how to behave properly; so the Lord had to tell us. Now that we have the Law handed down through Moses, and Jesus to explain what it really means, and also to inspire us with his example and threaten us with destruction if we step out of line, we ought to be all set. All we have to do is what the Law demands.

But it never works out that way, does it? Why not? It's because this way of thinking misdiagnoses the basic problem. It's not that we don't know the difference between right and wrong. Nor is it that we aren't properly inspired to do what's right or sufficiently threatened to avoid doing what's wrong. We keep on sinning despite it all. We're still selfish. We still tell each other lies. We still lust and covet and hate. We still sin against the Law of God in every way imaginable. And even that is not the problem. It's only a symptom of the problem. It's not that we sin; it's that we are sinners. By nature, that's what we do because we are the slaves and captives of sin.

God knows this. And so, he didn't give us the Law to teach us how to behave properly. He gave it to prove to us that we can't. He didn't give the Law to set us free; but rather to show us that we are imprisoned under its unyielding demands. He didn't give us the Law to enrich our spiritual life; he gave it to us to show us that we are spiritually poor and destitute – that we have nothing good to offer God.

And that's what John's imprisonment shows: where the Law of God leads and where it must end – in doubt, disappointment, and despair in a hot cell in the desert wilderness outside the Promised Land. John is a living picture of the eternal fate of everyone who tries to live by the Law of God. Even the best person – the one Jesus called the greatest born of women – ends up a prisoner outside the Kingdom of God.

But that is not where Jesus leaves him. "Go talk to John. Just talk. Tell him what's going on: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleaned, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them. Don't be offended on account of me and you will be blessed." That was the good news that John in his spiritual poverty needed to hear. And of course, what Jesus was saying was that there was no need to look for another. I'm the One, John. Trust me. I know what I'm doing.

I have no doubt that those words of Christ had the desired effect and that by trusting in them John was set free of his sin and doubt and reentered the Kingdom of God. And that's where we want to be and remain: in God's Kingdom – a Kingdom of faith in Christ. So it's important that we not fall into the trap that John did by expecting Christ to be someone else, someone who's going to hammer us and others into shape by imposing and enforcing God's Law. Rather he is our Savior who came to do what we could never do. He kept the Law of God for us – all of it. And then he literally became hammered by the Law for us and for our sin when nails were driven into his hands and feet from which he hung on the cross. You want God to take action in your life? You want God to fix what's bad and broken? That's where he did it. That's where you ought to look, for there you will find the only One God sent and the Savior you need. May he give us the grace never to look for another. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***