

**Third Sunday, December 15, 2013**  
**Advent 3 - Year A**  
**Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:4-9 or Canticle 3 or 15; 1 James 5:7-10;**  
**Matthew 11:2-11**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”**

“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” As Barbara Brown Taylor points out, that has to be one of the most heart-wrenching questions in all of Scripture, especially when we consider who is asking it.<sup>1</sup> It is John speaking through his disciples—John the Baptist who had devoted his life to preparing others for the way of the Lord, and making straight the path of God in peoples’ hearts through his fiery words and baptism of repentance. John it was who had boldly testified about Jesus saying, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” It was John who was standing in the River Jordan when he looked up and saw Jesus, and tried to change places with him. “I need to be baptized by you,” John said, “and do you come to me?” And it was John who was there when the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended on Jesus like a dove, as a voice from heaven proclaimed who he was for all to hear, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.”

But in today’s gospel we hear, “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” What in the world has happened to John that he would ask such a thing? What has made him question the identity of the One for whom he has waited all his life? Well, first of all, John is in jail, put there by Herod for disapproving of Herod’s marriage to his half-brother’s wife. It will not be long before Herod’s new step-daughter asks for John’s head on a platter.

It is here in prison where we see an even deeper dimension of John’s faith and a related disillusionment he expresses. John’s situation was not very optimistic. His was not some 30-day misdemeanor. His sentence was indefinite—terminal, in fact. His future was taken from him. His exit would be by execution. In prison, John was cut off from Jesus and the rest of the world, or so it seemed; for from his cell John sends forth messengers to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”

This question contains a curious sense of time, “Are you the one who is to come...?” The present, the future and even the past are all there. Our own celebration of Advent contains the same merging of past, present and future. Christ has come. Christ will come again. And this focuses our attention on the present in which there may or may not be some visible sign of either.

John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask this question without any frills—a question that came out of his desperate seriousness. Back at the Jordan, John was able to boldly point out the Christ—the Messiah—in a moment of fulfillment that gave

meaning to his whole life. But now, John was trying to witness to the Messiah in prison, in the face of death, in failure when even the meaning of that glorious moment back at the Jordan seemed to have been cancelled out. At the close of his life, John was concerned not only for the success of his mission, as it were, but for the truth of his own life. Here is John, now in prison in another Advent mode—waiting and hoping, knowing that in the end what he could do would be of little consequence—for his prison door was shut and could only be opened from the outside. Meanwhile nothing had gone the way John thought it would.<sup>ii</sup> Instead of a powerful army of the righteous as John had hoped, Jesus was gathering a community of the poor and sick, the lost and the marginalized and outcasts. How disillusioning to John, and so he can only ask, “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” This is also John’s Calvary, so to speak, his moment of wondering what his life has been about and fearing that there has been a terrible mistake. It is his moment of wondering if he had been forsaken, if the one for whom he has waited all this time has turned out to be an imposter—not the Messiah at all but an idealistic dreamer whom the world will squash as easily as John himself.

It’s not so hard though to understand what John was going through. We have all, at some time or another, looked for a Messiah who did not come the way we wanted either. As we sit here one year after the insane massacre of innocent young children and their teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School, we, too, want the Messiah to come and to come right now with decisive action and clear answers to our dilemmas and questions. We want a Messiah who could prevent such tragedy, or rescue the innocent and punish the guilty, but this Messianic Intervener and Judge has not come, at least not the way we want or expect; and so, we also wonder at times if there is any justice in this world after all. Also, we want a messiah who will make us be good. We want a Lord who will take over our hearts and minds and bodies so that we cannot mismanage them anymore—a Lord who will heal us in spite of ourselves and who will not let us make any more big mistakes. And we want a Messiah who will do all these things for the whole world, and tell us all clearly where to go, what to do, and step in and straighten out all our messes. We want a Messiah who at the very least will keep our children safe and sound, curing any diseases they may get, or protecting them from heavily armed lunatics, or intervening no matter how fast they drive. And we want a Messiah to come who will keep the human race from doing itself in, and intervene no matter what weapons we invent, or ethnic divisions we foment, or environmental destruction we refuse to prevent. One look at the news is enough to convince many of us that putting human beings in charge of God’s Creation was a good idea, that simply did not work. We will gladly surrender our freedom for a little divine security, and God knows, the earth cannot stand much more in the way of human dominance.

But none of those is the Messiah we get! Instead we get the One who waits while we find our own answers and take some initiative ourselves, and make our own mistakes. We get a Messiah who gives suspended sentences to the guilty and

who often lets humankind stew in the consequences of our own actions. Again, we get one who appears weak so that we may be strong—we get a Messiah who comes as a little child so that we can finally grow up, as William Sloane Coffin put it.

And so we, too, send the message, “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” Today’s gospel is a story of great disillusionment—John’s, ours, everyone’s who looks for a Messiah who does not come, or who does not come in the ways we want or expect. But such disillusionment is not a bad thing! Disillusionment is, literally, the loss of illusion—about ourselves, about the world, about God. We are not always too happy about asking John’s question, since it implies a questioning about ourselves, of our place in this world, and of the very meaning and purpose of the mystery of Christ. And while it is almost always a painful thing, it is never a bad thing, to lose the lies or myths or illusions we have mistaken for the truth.

Dis-illusioned, we find out that God does not conform to our expectations. We glimpse our own relative size in the universe and see that no human being can say who God should be or how God should act. We review our requirements of God and recognize many of them as our own fictions, things we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel safe or good or comfortable. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “Did God fail to come when I rubbed the lantern? Then perhaps God is not a genie. Who, then, is God? Did God fail to punish my enemies? Then perhaps God is not a cop. Who, then, is God? Did God fail to make everything run smoothly? Then perhaps God is not a mechanic. Who, then, is God?”<sup>iii</sup>

Dis-illusioned, we find out what is not true and we are set free to seek what is—if we dare to turn away from the God who was supposed to be, in order to seek the God who *is*. Every letdown becomes a lesson, and hopefully a way of luring us closer to God. For many of us what is lacking is not so much the courage to ask the question, “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”—as is the courage to expect an answer. The biggest clue to its answer for us lies in what we are preparing for. Are we preparing for no answer or for despair and death, as John was? Or are we preparing for Christ’s answer which came back to John, namely that God’s Kingdom was indeed coming and had begun to burst forth with Jesus. Christ’s answer, “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.” Jesus simply sends John’s disciples back to him to tell their teacher what they have seen and heard—broken people being made whole, sick people being healed, dead people being revived and poor people being given hope. All are signs of life and hope, signs of the repair of the world, proceeding from the Love of God. Evil and distress give way to good in physical and visible ways. All these signs are evidence of an inexhaustible living power, the Divine action of life and love itself bursting into time and reversing the work of death.

Advent for us means asking John's question, but then also preparing for and accepting Jesus' answer—this new beginning, new reality replacing our despairing and illusory perspectives. It means a readiness to have eternity and time meet not only in Christ but in us, in our disillusionment, in our lives and in our world.<sup>iv</sup> So, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" Well, you decide. Look around you and see. Never mind who Jesus is supposed to be; what do you hear and see? Can you turn this question from "Are you the one" to the affirmation, "You are the One!" If we await anything in this season, may it be the courage to commit, to change our questions into affirmation. Courage literally means "strength of heart." And such strength comes not just from encountering our disillusionments, but in examining and exercising our God-given gifts and blessings. What has God done in your life? What have you seen and heard of God lately. Well, commit to *that*; go and tell what you have seen and heard. Then God will have to wait no longer. God has promised to meet *us*, not our expectations. And what we will find out is that Jesus is not less, but far more than anything we can desire or pray for.

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<sup>i</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 17

<sup>ii</sup> As Barbara Brown Taylor describes it, according to John, the Messiah was supposed to change things. The Messiah was supposed to chop down and burn up and sweep away all the deadwood of the world. He was supposed to come with a sharp ax, with a gleaning pitchfork and winnowing fan, and with fire, and separate the good guys from the bad guys once and for all. He was supposed to clean up the world, so that people like Herod would no longer be in power, and people like John would no longer be in prison; but Jesus had utterly failed to meet John's expectations. After all, Jesus was doing very little to clear the rotten wood and the chaff, as it were, that John had singled out for fiery destruction. To carry this metaphor further, Jesus seems more interested in poking around dead stumps for new growth and in throwing parties for the new shoots when he finds them; and all in all, it is more than John can bear. - *Ibid.*, p. 18

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20

<sup>iv</sup> Jesus adds, "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." As Barbara Taylor, adds, "Blessed are those who do not let the Messiah they are expecting blind them to the Messiah who is standing right in front of them. Blessed are those who keep a list of what God *is* doing and not only what God is *not*. Blessed are those who are not afraid to revise [and revive] the hope that is in them, pushing through their disillusionment into a place of new and clearer vision." - *Ibid.*, p. 21