

*The One Who Is to Come*

Most children believe in many improbable and impractical things – they believe that gravity is something they can overcome, that most of what happens on television is real, and that parents can fix anything. But eventually there comes a time when their faith in these things are tested – when they fall hard enough after trying to fly off the playground equipment, which is usually followed by not believing in that tv character who can fly and yes, parents, it’s true, you can’t fix everything for your children, and that’s ok. While this may sound like a disheartening loss of innocence to some, I would say these are good lessons for our children to learn. And as their faith is reshaped and reformed over the years through doubt and testing – their worldview continues to change and strengthen into something they can stand by into adulthood. Faith and doubt, belief and questioning, these are things that fit together like parts of a puzzle, pieces that, when put together over time, shape our own worldview – and our own sense of discipleship.

And here we come to John the Baptist. John – the one who preached of the coming Messiah long before Jesus ever went public with his ministry. John – the one whom Jesus asked to baptize him and who saw the dove of the Holy Spirit and heard the voice of God speaking, “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” This same John, who witnessed all of these things, who preached so strongly and passionately for what he believed that he was imprisoned – *this* John begins to question Jesus. And not just questions of piety or fasting, but John send his disciples to ask the pivotal question: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” In essence, “Are you the Messiah about whom I’ve been preaching?” Wow. When John decides to explore his doubt he goes right to the heart of it. I mean, think about it, this is what the man has lived and breathed for years – and it seems that for some time he embraced Jesus as the Christ – as the Messiah. And yet, he doubts.

To some extent, John’s question may be our question, also. When in this season of anticipation and joy, we can only find loneliness and unanswered questions, he may speak for those of us who were once sure of our faith but now are not so sure. In this time when we speak of the coming Savior, the Messiah, John speaks for those who are intrigued by all that Jesus has done but wonder if there’s really any ultimate meaning in all of it. And here in Advent, when so often the words of the prophets speak of the Prince of Peace and the restoration of the nations and we are still a country at war, John speaks for those of us who are beginning to doubt whether the ways of peace and gentleness and compassion can ever really work in a world where so very few have most of the power – and they’re not listening. How can we, living in the world today, not ask those questions? Questions like, is there really a God who knows and cares? Does this God have a plan for the world? For me? If so, is Jesus the definitive revelation of God, or should we look elsewhere for answers to ultimate questions? “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

It is in times like these that we so desperately need to hear the answer Jesus has to give. Jesus says, “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.” Jesus’ words are perhaps not what John expected to hear. John had been preaching about the coming of a new kingdom and a time of baptism by fire – about a literal overturning of the current rulers of the day, both political and religious. What Jesus had to say probably didn’t seem to speak to that for John. I can just see John saying, “yes, lame walk, blind see, that’s all good, aaannnd...”

We all come with our own expectations when it comes to faith and doubt. When we ask these kinds of questions, it’s difficult not to have expectations of what the answers will be. But faith does not grow from our testing Jesus against our criteria to see if he measures up to the standards we have set for him. What we want to hear and what we need to hear are often

different things. And when we claim Jesus as the Christ – as the Messiah – it means much, much more than we can always comprehend. Jesus does not merely speak of the coming of a new kingdom, he does not speak about saving personal souls, he does not speak about those who are righteous and those who are not. No, when Jesus answers this pivotal question, he speaks of transforming lives, of preaching good news to those who had never heard it, of healing people in the world in a way that only the prophets had spoken of before. Jesus speaks of a world in which much has changed and much will still be transformed. While Jesus does not see his mission as the Messiah to include fire and judgment, he *is* bringing about Messianic hope to a people who so desperately need it. It is a hope that can still carry on for us today. It is a hope that can reach more broadly into the world, bringing about change and grace in ways not even thought possible. It is a hope that can carry us much farther than knowing who is righteous and who is not – who will “get into heaven” and who will be left behind. Where is the good news in that?

When we experience friends and loved ones who are inexplicably sick and dying, we need to hear of the Christ’s healing and peaceful presence; when the world around us seems to be tearing apart at the seams – we need to hear of the Christ who brings the good news to all people; when senseless car accidents leave our young people dead or injured – we need to hear of the Christ who cares for each of us in this world; when in this season of Advent we cannot feel God’s presence anywhere near us – we need to hear of the Christ who will come into our lives once again.

And when we feel that we’ve got nothing left, when our well of faith has seemingly dried up and the only things remaining are questions that we feel have no answers – we need to hear the Christ claim that John – John who doubted him enough to ask if he was even the Messiah – John was still a prophet, no, MORE than a prophet, in Jesus’ eyes. For that is where this passage leads: it begins with questioning from John, and ends with Jesus’ praise of John – claiming that he is the one who was written about, the messenger who would prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Jesus never rebukes John for his questioning, but instead offers him answers and praise. And that’s good news for us all to hear.

Faith and doubt – those puzzle pieces that fit together to make up the whole of discipleship. The good news is it’s ok to ask questions – even after all you may have seen and heard, after all the blessings you may have experienced in your life – even when you have been willing to give up your life for your beliefs – even then we can and should ask. For our own walk with God, our own discipleship can be made all the clearer by asking. When there are those times in our lives when we can do nothing else but ask questions of God, Jesus Christ lets us know our questions will be welcomed, as will our doubts. And isn’t it good news to know we believe in a God who can handle being questioned? Who can accept us for all that we are – our human faith and our frailty? Who has the strength to take our challenges and the gentleness not to rebuke us for asking? To me that is indeed an amazing and powerful God, much more so than a God who would demand blind obedience and faith.

And that’s part of what we can celebrate in this season of Advent – in this season of preparation for the coming Lord. This is a time to ask questions – to seek answers – to push our faith to new limits. The coming of Christ into this world is a big deal! That’s why we take some time to get ready for it. Whether we are spending these weeks in joyful preparation or heartfelt meditation or anguished questioning – that is what this time is for.

There is an old Jewish saying that a professor of mine taught me during one of my own periods of questioning in college. It goes something like this, “Be joyful to God, be grateful to God, grieve at God, be angry at God, shout to the highest heavens if you must. But never, ever be indifferent to God.” As we begin to move towards the end of the Advent season and inexorably towards Christmas, let us remember for whom we are waiting: the one who makes the lame

walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, who cleanses the lepers and raises the dead, who preaches the good news to the poor. In faith and in doubt – it is the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, who is the one to come.