

WAITING FOR JESUS

(Matthew 11:2-11)

Pat Cameron; December 12, 2010

In our text this morning, John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him a question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" This morning, I want to consider this question and how Jesus responds to it. Then, I want us to consider this question for ourselves and think about how we would respond. During this season of waiting it seems timely to ask ourselves: who is it that we are waiting for?

Matthew tells us that John is in prison; this is why he has to send his disciples to ask the question he has for Jesus. Before his imprisonment, John was a charismatic, fire-and-brimstone preacher and baptizer. He lived in the wilderness and wore a camel-hair coat and leather belt.

Nowadays, our image of a camel-hair coat is smooth, elegant and expensive. But John's coat was made out of the course, rough, and cheap material that peasants wore. The hair coat and leather belt were also worn by some of Israel's prophets, including Elijah. (<http://bibletab.com>).

John ate whatever he could find in the wilderness: wild honey and locusts. The term translated "honey" is ambiguous. It can refer to honey produced by bees or other sweet substances. The wild honey that John supped upon might have been sweet tree sap (John Kelhofer, "John the Baptist's 'Wild Honey' and Honey in Antiquity," www.duke.edu). Locusts were abundant in the region, especially in the wilderness, and along with crickets, sanctioned food in Leviticus Chapter 11. An analysis of the nutritional content of desert locusts reveals that they are 75% protein and are said to taste like crab or shrimp (www.answerbag.com).

For those who responded to his message of repentance, John performed baptisms-- ritual cleansings in the Jordan River. In John's time, many people believed there would be last judgment during which everyone would have to walk through a river of fire; those with sin would be consumed. John offered a way to get rid of sin *now* and pass through the fire unscathed. (Walter Wink, "John the Baptist" in the Oxford Companion to the Bible: 371-73). Baptism offered a kind of fire insurance.

A passionate preacher who sounded and looked like an Old Testament prophet, ate strange food, and offered a ritual of repentance through water instead of fire—it's not hard to understand why John had attracted a following-- disciples, who remained loyal to him even while he was in prison.

Why was John in prison? According to the Mark's gospel, King Herod had married Herodias, who had been married to his brother Philip. Herodias left Philip to marry Herod. John had told Herod that this was unlawful, so Herod had John imprisoned. Mark tells us that Herod knew that John was a righteous and holy man, so even though Herodias wanted John executed, Herod protected him. Mark describes Herod as "perplexed" when he listened to John, but he liked to hear him anyway. (Mark 6:17-20)—that is, except about his marital choice. Mark also says that Herod feared John (Mk 6:20). The Jewish historian, Josephus, explains that Herod had John imprisoned because he was afraid that John might complain too much about Herod's marriage—already the talk of the town-- and cause an uprising (<http://wiki.answers.com>).

So John sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should are we to wait for another?" Why would John ask such a question, having baptized Jesus? Apparently, John had known who Jesus was, for on that occasion, because John said to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by *you*, and do you come to *me* (Mt. 3:14)? So why does John ask this question now? Matthew gives a clue when he tells us that John asks the question because [he "heard in prison what the Messiah was doing" (11:2). John has heard what Jesus is doing, and it sounds un-Messiah-like.

John Piler, writing on the St. Louis University website, reminds us that:

In Jesus' time there was no uniform or even dominant Judean idea about the Messiah. There wasn't even a uniform understanding of Judaism. The multiplicity of ideas in this period prompts contemporary scholarship to talk about "Judaisms" and "their Messiahs" (Piler, www.liturgy.slu.edu).

John had a specific Messianic ideal, and from what he had heard, Jesus didn't measure up. In Craig Keener's *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, he says:

Jesus' ministry so far fulfilled *none* of John's eschatological promises [that is, promises having to do with what would happen at the end of time]. John had preached that the Coming One would baptize in the Spirit and fire, casting the wicked into a furnace of fire (335, emphasis the author's). Quoted in article on Matthew 11 on www.crossmarks.com)

Keener also points out that the emphasis of John's question "whether we should look for another" is emphatic: a different *kind* of Messiah. (Keener 335 ; emphasis mine).

Jesus responds to John's question indirectly. He implies that John should answer his own question based upon what John's disciples have heard and seen about him. Quoting various verses from the book of Isaiah, Jesus reminds John's disciples that "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 (Mt. 11:4-6). The first five (seeing, walking, cleansing, hearing, and raising the dead) relate to Jesus' healing; and the last one ("the poor have good news brought to them") to Jesus' teaching. "And blessed is anyone," Jesus adds, "who takes no offense at me." Is this a subtle dig at John, who evidently *is* offended by how Jesus has challenged John's image of what a Messiah should be like?

When we look at Jesus' response to John, it is helpful to remind ourselves of Matthew's, the gospel-writer's, purpose. The primary subject of Matthew's gospel—and all the gospels, for that matter—is Jesus. By emphasizing that John is in prison, and can only indirectly communicate with Jesus, the focus of the gospel remains on Jesus. The question Matthew places in John's disciples' mouths is the same question being raised by Matthew's Jewish and Christian audience—is Jesus really the Messiah, or should we look elsewhere?

As we move into the next section in vs. 7-9, Jesus tells the crowd about who John is. But Matthew uses Jesus' words about John to tell more about Jesus. There is a subtext below the text. The text tells us about Jesus' description of who John is; but the subtext—and Matthew's purpose—is to describe who Jesus is.

Jesus asks the crowd, "What were you looking at when you went into the wilderness—"a reed shaken by the wind?" (Mt. 11:7). Of course not! The slightest wind blows a reed back and forth, up and down. Jesus suggests that John, the one who announced the coming of the Messiah, is not a reed, but steady and consistent in his commitment to God. For Matthew, this description of John also describes Jesus and provides another response to his detractors.

What were you looking at in the wilderness, "Someone dressed in soft robes?...those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces." (Mt. 11:8). Of course not! If those who went into the wilderness had been looking for a wealthy ruler wearing fine clothes, they would have been sadly disappointed. John was the opposite. His clothing was crude and rough to the touch--peasant clothing, not the clothing of royalty. He identified with the poor to whom he preached. Does this describe John or Jesus? Again, we see evidence that Matthew has crafted the story toward his concern: who *Jesus* is.

What were you looking at in the wilderness, a prophet? Of course!—a prophet --and more, Jesus says, describing John. Again, Matthew's concern is about Jesus. More than a prophet, Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed one.

In the final section from our text, vs. 10-11, Jesus reads John into the book of Isaiah, as he had earlier used Isaiah to describe himself. John is the messenger God has sent ahead of him, the one whom God has sent to prepare the way (Mt. 11:10). Jesus says, "John is the greatest;" but adds, "yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Mt. 11:11). Through Jesus, Matthew implies that in spite of his greatness, John's role is a limited one. John came to announce that the reign God was near. But Jesus came to announce that the kingdom is here and now. Those who follow Jesus are living in the kingdom and, through him, they can accomplish great deeds.

John faithfully prepared the way to God's kingdom; but now it's time to live in the kingdom: by helping the blind see, the lame walk, those with diseases heal, the deaf hear, the dead raised to life, and the poor to receive the good news—in other words, to respond compassionately to the needs of the most vulnerable; those living on the margins.

So during this Advent season, are we waiting for Jesus or are we wanting somebody else? How about someone who doesn't always challenge us to be more compassionate: who doesn't ask us to help shoulder the burdens of people who are having emotional, spiritual, or financial problems, or just need someone to talk to? How about someone who says "what you have, you deserve" instead of "give all you have to the poor"? How about someone who helps us work out compromises with the values of our society, instead of reminding us to ask ourselves "What would Jesus buy?," and "Where would Jesus live?" and "How much money would Jesus make?" and "What would Jesus drive—or would he just take the bus?" Surely, a different kind of Messiah would make life much easier.

But no matter how different our vision may be for an ideal leader; no matter how much we'd like to shape the values of the one we follow; no matter how much we'd rather wait for someone else who doesn't demand so much of us. Jesus is the one we're going to get on Christmas day—because Jesus is the Messiah; God's anointed; the one chosen by God for us. He'll arrive as a cute baby—but not for long. Before you know it, he'll be all grown up, inviting us to work with him in God's kingdom. And even though we try, he won't take "No" for an answer. Like it or not, for those who call themselves Christians, there's no one else to wait for.