

## **Advent 3 December 11 2022**

### **Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11**

Are you the one we're waiting for, or do we wait for another? It's a question we are familiar with- from children's books "Are you my mother?" to movies- "Are you a god?" – to our own lives. Asking someone if they are the date their looking for, or the manager, or the pastor. We know what it was like for the disciples of John to approach Jesus and ask the question they have been given by John. Are you the one we are waiting for, or do we wait for another?

Now, while we learned last week that Jesus does not judge others on the surface of things (sight and hearing) that is exactly what he points to in answering their question.

Go back and tell John what you hear and see. Tell him about my teaching- to give to anyone who asks of you, turn the other cheek, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, to forgive others so that you may be forgiven. Tell him about what you see- that those who are without sight, have it restored, those who cannot walk are moving around, those who had leprosy have it removed, those who cannot hear- hear, those who are dead are raised, those who are poor have good news brought to them.

These are an echo of the words we hear in Isaiah this morning, a renewal of all creation that is like the desert suddenly coming alive with blooms. Where those whose lives have been stripped bare by challenges blossoms into a vision of what God created the world to be. Where all creation thrives.

Now, we don't know what John and his disciples thought of this, scripture doesn't tell us, but apparently this teaching and these things Jesus did for others offended some people. Literally, the text says it scandalized them. That it was a stumbling block for them.

But why? Aren't these good things? Don't these healings show the power of God at work and even tie into what the Hebrew Scriptures say about who God is and what God does in this world? Why are these religious authorities from the Temple and other leaders scandalized by what Jesus is doing? Tripped up by it.

Maybe it is because what Jesus is doing doesn't match the cultural understanding of what a Messiah is to be about. The Messiah is primarily expected to be a great warrior, priest, and ruler who will throw out the Roman occupiers with power and restore Israel to its proper place in the world. To be one who walks in the halls of power. What Jesus is doing doesn't match that. Yes, the coming Messiah is a healer. But the way Jesus is going about it, was different, wasn't what they were expecting. He walks not in the halls of power, but amongst the poor, the sick, the outcast. In many ways defiling himself. And in doing so Jesus demanded something of them. A change in how they viewed the world. Viewed the Messiah. A change in how they behaved. So, they were scandalized. Tripped up by it. Couldn't experience the changed thinking that is repentance.

Jesus, in turn, asks a very good question of the crowd, what did you come out to John to see? Was it just the spectacle of the latest internet sensation, the latest tweaker of the social order who doesn't follow propriety? So you could get in on the action and excitement and laugh as they flaunt the social conventions? Yeah, stick it to the man!

What did you come out to see, he asks? Someone who fits the mold of what we expect of the announcer of the Messiah? One who is wearing the rich opulent robes befitting the part?

But that isn't what they found. What they found, was the truth- a man living on the edge of the wilderness, a place of wandering, of desolation, but also the place of the rebirth of their lives as people of God when God saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. A man clothed, not in fine robes, but in camels' hair who eats an organic diet. Most certainly not what you would expect.

The offense, the scandal, what trips them up is seeing both in John and certainly in Jesus someone who comes in and crosses every religious and societal boundary and expectation they have. Who frees people from what binds them, what keeps them from fully participating in society, without any regard for the way things are done. The religious understanding of that time was that those people who are poor, or cannot hear or see, or have leprosy have done something to deserve all those things. That their sinfulness or actions brought it about. And Jesus just lets them off the hook. With no obvious remorse or change on their part. Scandalous.

Does the gospel of Jesus Christ offend you? Does it scandalize you? Trip you up? The Rev. Richard Jensen once wrote that "If one hasn't been offended by the gospel that is Jesus, we might wonder if that one understands the gospel at all!"

What scandalizes us about this good news that Jesus brings? What trips us up?

Is it that the Jesus we encounter in scripture does not match the Jesus we want to see? Is it because Jesus isn't just healing individuals but is about demolishing a system. Are we scandalized because he upsets the status quo? Because he

punctures the tame approximation of the Messiah that we feel comfortable following? One who doesn't demand too much of us. Let's us just be good and nice, check in every now and again, and go on our way with minimal fuss.

Part of the scandal of Jesus is that it isn't just about the individual. The curing of this person with leprosy or that person who is deaf, but he is actively working to resist any system- imperial, political, medical, social, religious- that is destructive of life and community. But it is life and community as imagined by God, not by people.

As you listen to these gospel stories week after week, are there things that scandalize you? Make you uncomfortable? Trip you up? Are hard to wrap your head around?

For me, what makes me uncomfortable are those things that challenge what sustains the relatively comfortable life I have created. A lifestyle that buffers us from worse circumstances. But which also keep us from fully stepping into this promised reign of God. One where we literally don't see in our daily lives the least of these. The homeless, the outcast. A challenge to leave some or all of that behind and follow Jesus into the messy places of life. What trips me up is often not the thought, but the action that follows.

I think this relates to the additional question of why the good news Jesus brings is only good news to the poor and not the rich?

Martin Luther says it this way, *"Jesus proclaims, "But my kingdom, because it seeks not its own advantage, but rather bestows benefits upon others, is sufficient of itself and needs no one's help; therefore, it cannot bear to be surrounded by*

*such as are already sufficient of themselves, such as are healthy, rich, strong, pure, active, pious, and able in every respect. To such I am of no benefit; they obtain nothing from me.”*

The gospel that Jesus brings is for those who are poor, who are famished, who are hurt in some way- physically, spiritually, socially. Who are broken. And so if you think you are not broken- that you have it all together on your own- well then Christ may be of no use to you. As Mother Teresa once said, “God cannot fill what is already full”.

We talked on Wednesday about a practice of releasing. Of moving out all of those things, that stuff physical, spiritual, emotional, time that crowds out God. I wonder if sometimes we cram those things in because we are trying to hide our own brokenness. Our own woundedness. To plaster it over with stuff, or busy-ness. So that no one, especially ourselves, can see it. So that we don't feel it.

Perhaps the scandal for us, the stumbling block, is that we cannot bring ourselves to admit the truth of our own need for Jesus. Our deep longing to be one of those Jesus lays his hands on and brings renewed vision, ability to hear, energy to move, who speaks to us a clear voice of welcome, of affirmation, of celebration. To have Jesus come to us in our doubts, our fears, our messed up and messy lives, hold us close look us in the eyes and say, I love you, just as you are. And by that love, that wholehearted embrace, makes us whole. Give us peace- wholeness. Pull all of those broken pieces back together again and fill in the cracks with his own love and grace.

The good news Jesus brings is that those who are broken are not cursed by God but beloved of God. That what has brought these things upon them are often not their own doing, but something else. Lack of community, hardship brought on by the system we live in, by the circumstances of where you were born and who you were born to. And that regardless of how it has happened, God can heal it. God can release you from it. God can make you whole. In Christ.

The good news is that the only prerequisite for being filled with God's grace is to be empty- to release our need to be in control, to maintain the illusion- and to admit our brokenness. The good news is the only prerequisite for being resurrected is you must already be dead.

But that's okay, God in Jesus knows how to bring what seems dead back to life. To make even the barren desert bloom into life. Water flowing, flowers blossoming, the brown landscape turned green and lush. The good news is that Jesus, the one we have been waiting for, who makes all things new, who brings us into right relationship with God and brings the reign of God into being comes to us. Emmanuel, God with us, comes – soon and again- bringing good news to the poor and broken, hope for the hopeless, joy for the sorrowful, healing for the brokenhearted.

This is good news for you and good news for you to carry to others. Thanks be to God!