

“LOOKING OUT FOR THE MESSIAH,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, March 14, 2021

In our gospel passage for this morning, John the Baptist asks the most momentous question. Imprisoned for speaking out against a corrupt King Herod and his Queen Herodias, John sends a secret message to Jesus. It is a blunt inquiry. “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” (*Matthew 11:3*) In other words, John is asking whether Jesus is a messiah wannabe--or the real thing.

Up until the day of his jailing, a faithful, fearless, incorruptible John had lived off the land, dressed in crudely-sewn camel skins and eating locust beans and wild honey. (*Mark 1:5-6*) All the while he kept preaching and proclaiming that Israel’s long-awaited messiah was about to appear. (*Mark 1:7-8*) With every breath in his body, John insistently and urgently called the people of Israel to prepare for the messiah’s arrival by spiritual repentance—a change of heart and mind. To encourage such repentance, John offered all sincere men and women a baptism of water for the symbolic cleansing of sin. (*Mark 1:1-5; Matthew 3:7-10*) Even Jesus came to the River Jordan to be baptized by John, who through family genealogy was a distant cousin. (*Mark 1:9-11; Luke 1:39-45*)

Unfortunately, John’s boldness in criticizing King Herod and Queen Herodias for their incestuous marriage was what had cost him his personal liberty. (*Matthew 13:1-5*) Never one to brook criticism, the Judean king, who had married his late brother’s wife, retaliated by having his guard physically seize and detain John the Baptist. Of course, if he had been up to Herod alone, he would have executed John on the spot. But this fierce prophet was far too popular. Public opinion stayed Herod’s hand. Consequently, John was tossed into a dungeon. According to the Jewish historian Josephus that dungeon was at the formidable hilltop fortress of Machaerus at the mouth of the Jordan River on the eastern side of the Dead Sea.

Ultimately, Herod did prove successful in murdering John. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark actually inform us that Herod presented Queen Herodias with the gift of John’s severed head on a platter. (*Matthew 14:6-12; Mark 6:27-29*) Yet, meantime, awaiting his brutal fate, John had to molder away in his prison cell. Fortunately, by means unknown to us, John the Baptist was able to remain in touch with some of his own followers. They kept John apprised of events and circumstances outside his prison walls. Soon they were reporting on Jesus’ own amazing ministry. Intrigued, if not excited, John through his loyal followers sent forth from his prison cell that big question that was on his mind. (*Matthew 11:2-3*) And it’s a question that yet rings across the millennia between then and now. “Are you,” he so very pointedly asked Jesus, “the one who is come or should we look for another?”

For John this question was not idle. From the start of his own ministry, informed by the word of Israel's greatest ancient prophets, John had hoped and prayed for the coming of Israel's promised messiah—the one whom could deliver the Jewish nation from shame of its own sinful misfortunes. At the baptismal moment at the River Jordan, Jesus had impressed him greatly. (*Matthew 3:13-15*) There was another moment also when John clearly perceived that Jesus might very well be the “Lamb of God.” (*John 1:29*) When some of John's own followers complained that Jesus was baptizing men and women in the neighboring province of Judea and competing with their baptisms, John took no offense. (*John 3:2:26*) Instead, withholding judgment, he remarked that “No one can have anything unless God gives it to him.” (*John 3:27*) In other words, in time God and events would disclose Jesus' true nature and identity.

All the while, however, John had anticipated that the messiah's arrival would be announced by some thundering cataclysm, shaking heaven and earth. (*John 1:31-34*) How different the reports that John was now receiving! Jesus, it was said, was walking the countryside, mingling with rich and the poor, the humble and the exalted, as well as the pious and the impious. He was preaching a gospel that had as much to do with love and joy as judgment. Indeed, Jesus spoke of a God more compassionate and fatherly than the stern and punitive figure that John had contemplated. Given all of John the Baptist's assumptions about both God and the messiah, how could he not have been perplexed and bewildered?

I can almost imagine John pacing his cell, even rattling its bars and his own chains, ruminating in wonder, puzzlement, and hope, asking again and again, “Is this messiah I foretold?” Thus, under the circumstances, there must have been the profoundest sense of urgency behind every word of that message which John dispatched to Jesus: “Are you the one, or should we look for another?”

For his own part, Jesus received John's questioning message calmly. As we hear in our morning gospel lesson, he had only the greatest admiration for John the Baptist's integrity. (*Matthew 11:11*) Consequently, Jesus did not take umbrage at any skepticism on John's part. He was not insulted. Instead, Jesus offered a very forthright answer to John and everyone else who had “ears to hear.” (*Matthew 11:15*) As you may remember from our gospel lesson, Jesus expressly declares:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached them.”

Jesus then adds: “And blessed are those who have no doubts about me.” (*Matthew 11:4-6*) Basically, in citing all the miracles that were happening through his ministry, fulfilling

the prophecies of Isaiah which we also read this morning, Jesus was affirming that God's reign was already at hand. (*Isaiah 35:5-7*)

Granted, there was no cataclysm to announce the messiah's arrival as John had perhaps expected. Nevertheless, the healing and renewal of so many was a rich portent and sign that the kingdom of God was truly dawning. Jesus was confident that subsequent events would conquer any lingering doubts that John and his followers might have had, once and for all establishing his own identity as the messiah in the hearts and minds of those who love God. At the same time, Jesus didn't have to prove anything. He was the real thing.

In light of John the Baptist's death, which soon followed, we don't know anything more about what John said or felt. However, we do know that some of John the Baptist's followers did turn to Jesus. Among them were Philip and Andrew, who both became apostles. (*John 1:43-45*) Andrew was also the brother of another major future apostle, Simon Peter.

Holy scripture briefly describes all these important connections of John the Baptist's followers to Jesus. As the gospel recounts, Jesus discovered both Philip and Andrew following him and, turning around to address them, asked: "What do you seek?" When they responded by inquiring as to where Jesus was staying, he simply replied: "Come and see." (*John 1:39-41*) They did and remained with Jesus ever after, embracing him as the messiah.

Though not so well-known as the other apostles, Philip figures prominently at Jesus' side, --often at meal times! He was likely with Jesus at wedding feast of Cana and helping out at the time of Jesus' miracle of loaves and fishes. (*John 2:1-3; 6:5-13*) Still later, along with all the other apostles, he was in attendance at the Last Supper. (*John 12:20-22; 13:1-2*)

Meanwhile, it is Andrew who introduces his brother Simon Peter to Jesus for the first time. As John's Gospel recounts, Andrew sought his brother Simon Peter and said: "We have found the messiah." Next, he actually brought Simon Peter to meet Jesus. (*John 1:40-42*) The meeting must have made a huge impression on Simon Peter. Thereafter, when Jesus comes along as both brothers are fishing on shores of the Sea of Galilee and invites them to become "fishers of men" they immediately drop their nets and join him. (*Matthew 4:18-20*) The rest is history—rich biblical history.

Naturally, from our vantage point as 21st century Christians it may be rather easy for us to be surprised that John the Baptist and his band of followers would question Jesus as they originally did. Or be amazed that they or anyone else might be skeptical or doubtful with regard to the truth of Jesus' identity as the messiah. But with all the advantages of time and full gospel testimony, do we necessarily do much better?

In our day, we seem to know and not know who Jesus is. Yes, we may profess Jesus as the messiah and savior in word and worship. Yet does our daily life offer equal testimony to such professed conviction? Do we act and live in a way that reflects that Jesus is the one? Or are we always consciously or unconsciously on the lookout for someone else or some other thing to save us? As you may remember, the first commandment of the decalogue—the Ten Commandments—is this: Thou shalt have no other gods before me. (*Exodus 20:3*) Likewise, as Christian men and women we should have no other Christ before us—no other Savior.

Friends, I've never been a big Country and Western fan. But there's a song by Johnny Lee that just won't leave me when I think about the foolishness of our own sometime ways. The title and first line of that Johnny Lee hit says it all—"Looking for love in all the wrong places...and in all the wrong faces." Yes, some folks think that their salvation is going to come with tons of money. Or lots of power. Or athletic prowess at sports. Still others pursue fame or the perennial thrill of sex and romance. And you know the old saying: "The boys with the most toys win!"

Of course, all these things can offer entertainment and pleasure in this world. Yet how much real love? How much real satisfaction? How much salvation in the end? One of the reasons why so many people today choose the oblivion of alcohol and drugs is that all these much-touted pursuits or solutions bring only fleeting pleasure and *not* greater, deeper happiness that a life with Jesus as messiah offers.

As Paul Tillich, one of our United Church of Christ theologians noted, the very word salvation comes from the original Latin word *salvus*. And *salvus*, which also gives us the word *salve*, variously means safe, saved, sound, preserved, unharmed, unscathed, uninjured, but also healthy and wholesome. This is what salvation through Jesus Christ is all about. This is what our love for Christ and his love for us make possible for our lives. Jesus' love for us was so great that he was willing to go to the cross on our behalf, sacrificing his own life so that we might be awakened to the power of love—love for God and love for one another--as the most vital and redeeming way of life.

Congregation, we don't have to look anywhere else but Jesus for the way of life that can drive desperation and despair from our door and enable us to live meaningfully and purposely now with the promise of eternal life to come. In these Lenten weeks, let us each rededicate our lives to Jesus, fully embracing him as our messiah and the means by which we know real salvation, real health, real well-being. **Amen.**