

Jim Gill

December 11, 2016

"The One"

Isaiah 35:1-10 Matthew 11:2-11 romans 15:4-13

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 35:1-10

This morning's reading from Isaiah promised many things. It is a message of hope with a promise of joy. One of the promises is one I have been clinging to over these last couple of months. You'll know which one it is when you hear it. Hear the word of God from Isaiah 35:1-10

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 11:2-11

Last week we looked at John the Baptist's job description. This week we look at Jesus' job performance record. Will you please stand for the reading of the gospel from Matthew 11:2-11.

Let's Pray, Eternal God, you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of your Son. Grant us the wisdom to see your purpose and openness to hear your word that we too may prepare the way for Christ who is coming in power and glory to establish his kingdom of peace and justice. Give us ears to hear and hearts to respond to this your word.

The pastor John Maxwell tells a story about a salesman who went to his barber for a haircut. He told the barber about his upcoming trip to Rome. The barber had only negative comments to make about the airline the salesman had chosen, the hotel where he was going to stay, about Rome in general, and even about his hope of having an audience with the Pope. A month later the salesman returned to the barbershop. He said, "I had a wonderful trip. The flight was perfect and the hotel service was excellent. And I got to meet the Pope!" The barber asked, "What did the Pope say to you?" The salesman said, "He placed his hand on my head and said, 'My son, where did you get such a lousy haircut?'" 1)

Like we heard last week, John the Baptist never got a haircut but he still spent time around people like that critical barber. His ministry however, was spent being critical of those who NEEDED to be criticized. His message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." John wasn't afraid to proclaim his message to religious leaders and royalty alike. He wasn't even afraid to proclaim it to King Herod himself. This was not the King Herod who was the ruler at the time of the birth of Jesus; this was his son, Herod Antipas, who turned out to be far worse than his father. Herod Antipas seduced and later married his brother's wife, but first he killed his brother. John condemned the king's behavior and was placed in prison.

John is in prison on death row and now and he's looking for a sign - a sign that the long-awaited Messiah has really arrived. John wanted to know beyond a shadow of a doubt if Jesus really was the Messiah. Can you blame him? He had given everything he had - including, in a matter of days, his very life. He wanted to know, has it all been in vain? Is it all an illusion - a dream? In the wilderness John had believed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, but in the face of certain death he has some doubts. So he sent some

of his followers to find Jesus and ask him, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

Things were not working out like John had expected. Sometimes that happens to us as well-particularly at Christmas. I haven't had a White Christmas since 2007 or 08, but I went to the Baytown Little Theater's production's matinee yesterday and felt a little better. For some, this is not an easy time of year. It may seem inappropriate to talk about broken dreams and disappointments this close to Christmas. After all, this is the season to be jolly. Our theme today is JOY. But it's not jolly for everybody, is it? For those who have lost loved ones this is the loneliest time of the year. And in a world that glorifies materialism, those who are struggling financially may find it to be most disappointing.

I saw a post this week from my friend and neighbor Lana Donath about gifts from Santa. It said, "Just a reminder to all you parents out there to be modest with your gifts from Santa. Not all parents have a ton of cash to spend on making their kid's Christmas special, so it doesn't make sense to have Santa give your kid a Play Station 4, a bike and an iPad while his best friend at school gets a new hat from Santa. Give something small from Santa and make the more expensive presents from you. You can explain the value of money to kids, but you can't explain Santa's discrimination to a heartbroken kid...who is friends with your kid."

John was heartbroken. He was hurting. Prison in that time and place was no picnic. He was hurting physically and he was hurting emotionally. He was gripped with disappointment.

It's interesting how we fix in our minds certain images of people and block other images of the same people. We do that to biblical characters. We remember Peter's denial of Jesus, but forget his walking on water and his powerful preaching recorded in the book of Acts. Or, we remember how women came to Jesus for help from time to time, but forget how Jesus depended on the women for financial support and to announce the news of his resurrection. The temptation, especially in a culture that conditions us to remember the worst about people, is to remember the mistakes and forget the moments of brilliance.

Sometimes it's the other way around. Sometimes we remember the good moments of a person's life and gladly forget the unseemly events. Perhaps what we should remember is that we are all more complex than a single decision, or a single position on an issue, or a single event. It is wasted time to judge anyway, but especially so if we are only going to consider one moment out of a person's life. All of us are better than our worst moments. All of us are people with winding journeys and interesting stories, and none of us ought to be labeled for life as the result of only one scene from our lives.

We shouldn't do that to the people around us, and we shouldn't do that to the biblical characters either. What do we remember about John? We recall him preaching in the wilderness, calling people to repent of their sins and awaken to the kingdom of heaven. There he was confident, courageous, intense, and enthusiastic! Someone decisive and certain was needed to announce the coming of Jesus, and John was just that person.

That's how we remember John. Then we encounter this story from Matthew where John is asking, 'Are you the one?'

What we should realize is that this is as much a part of John's life as any other part. It's a part of our lives. We all have had moments of decisive commitments and unbounded energy, as well as times of deep uncertainty and extreme tentativeness. We have been there, or have seen others there. It doesn't happen only at the end of one's life, but all along the way we wonder if that decision was best, or that stance was right, or that choice appropriate.

Maybe life in a jail cell was wearing on him. Maybe Jesus was so different from what John expected that he wondered if Jesus could really be the messiah. Maybe John was doubting his earlier convictions. We feel bad about asking, but we need to know, just as John needed to know. We aren't likely to place our trust completely in anyone, or forsake all the other options, or give up all we have, if Jesus is not the one we think he is. "Jesus, are you the one?"

That is the kind of question that can get people in trouble. In some churches and families questions aren't very welcome. For a number of folks there is no room for questions, only answers. Those answers come with an authority that demands total allegiance and makes no allowance for possible differences in interpretation.

In many homes questions are frowned upon. The attitude expressed by a number of parents is, "I'll tell you the things you need to know when you need to know them." It is a way of keeping insecure parents in control of a situation. For them, life is a set of easy, neat answers. However, children soon learn that those easy, neat answers don't provide much of a foundation for living in a hard, complex world. And despite the best efforts of parents to squelch their children's questions, they still ask them. "What is happening to my body?" "Why are people starving in the world when we throw food out every night?" "If people are homeless, why can't they come and sleep in one of our spare bedrooms?" "Why can't I date that person?"

Questions can cause discomfort. In the church they often are seen as a sign of someone's losing faith. Most of the time, they are simply questioning. They are the cries of people who have found the easy answers to be empty. They are the yearnings of people who have found the neat answers to be inadequate. Frequently we ask questions as a means of sorting through the options, or gaining firsthand knowledge of something, or of becoming separate individuals. After all, at some point we need to know for ourselves. We may find that our discoveries are different from those of our parents, teachers, and ministers, or we may find that they are fairly similar, but every person needs and deserves the right to become one's own person. Without the freedom to ask questions, without the freedom to arrive at answers different from the ones given to us by others, we do not grow in our own understanding of anything.

Questions aren't bad, but not allowing them to be asked is. Questions are a way of loving God with our minds. Through questions we reach and explore and gain a better understanding of important matters. And even if someone else already has the very same answer, it is still worth the journey for us to come to know it firsthand. Don't be

disturbed by John's question, or other people's questions, or by your own. Instead, let us give thanks that our faith is still alive enough to ask questions. Let us give thanks that we haven't succumbed to this notion that we have heard it all before. Let us give thanks for those people in our lives who have created the space in which we are free to ask and explore and grow and learn. Let us give thanks for people who have opened for us new doors and different ways of thinking. Let us give thanks for people whose acceptance and love toward us was so certain that we found room to move around and be free without the fear of being judged for our questions.

Sometimes asking the right questions is more important than having the right answers. We don't have to live very long before we realize that we no sooner get an answer in our possession before it creates a hundred more questions. What does it mean that God is love? What action does my faith compel me to make in a world of pain and confusion? What did this hymn mean to me when I was a child and what does it mean to me now? Lanie Garrett had a beautiful article in this morning's Baytown Sun asking what did it mean for the shepherds to "quake at the sight" of angels announcing Jesus birth.

On Friday I ran into a friend I hadn't seen in a long time. He was coming out of a Guitar Store while I was going in. He is a nationally known Christian Recording artist that I first met in the late 70's when I was a Campus Minister and we were recording in the same studio. In catching up on old times he shared that 11 years ago he went through a devastating divorce that shook his world and world view. Because he was divorced he was let go from leading worship in a large church. He was devastated and discouraged. The old pat answers were not enough. But he met another pastor that cared for him and nurtured him and helped him walk through recovering. He had new questions. Eventually he came out on the other side, is now leading worship again, has remarried and he and his wife are the proud parents of an adopted 2 and a half year bouncing boy. He went through his dark night of the soul and came out on the other side.

An anonymous author made this striking comparison: "Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40, and Jesus for only 3. Yet the influence of Christ's 3-year ministry infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined 130 years of teaching from these men, who were among the greatest philosophers of all antiquity.

Jesus painted no pictures yet some of the finest paintings of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from him. Jesus wrote no poetry but Dante, Milton, and scores of the world's greatest poets were inspired by him. Jesus composed no music still Haydn, Handel, Beethoven, Bach, and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the hymns, symphonies, and oratorios they composed in his praise. Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by this humble Carpenter of Nazareth.

His unique contribution to humanity is the salvation of the soul! Philosophy could not accomplish that. Nor art. Nor literature. Nor music. Only Jesus Christ can break the enslaving chains of sin. He alone can speak peace to the human heart, strengthen the weak, and give life to those who are spiritually dead." 2

This week we have been mourning the loss of John Glenn, the first astronaut to orbit the earth. Charles Duke was one of the astronauts who was privileged to walk on the moon. After his time with NASA he had lacked purpose and meaning in his life. His wife, Dottie, was also troubled. In fact, she contemplated suicide. But then she began to attend church where she gave her life to Christ. Sometime later at his wife's Bible study Charles Duke gave his life to Jesus as well. He found a new and compelling purpose for his life. Today he offers this comment on his conversion, "Walking on the moon cannot compare with walking on earth with Jesus." 3

"Are you the one?" John the Baptist asked. Jesus sent back word, 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. That was Jesus' job performance report at that point.. There was still more to accomplish through his sacrifice and resurrection. Yes he was the One. There was no need to wait for another, but it was still important for him to ask the question.

We who continue to prepare our hearts for celebrating the arrival of Jesus into the world should find ourselves asking the same question. Most of us said years ago that he is the one, but that was the first step on a journey that lasts a lifetime. We still need to ask our questions as a sign that we are open to the growth and new life that God wills for us all. It is not until we ask, and ask over and over again, that we come to realize what Jesus' being the one means for our lives. There is room to grow in our faith and explore the deep possibilities of our commitment and continue to find new answers to John's question and our questions, to hear for ourselves Jesus answer, "Yes, I am ..the One."

Let us pray. Dear Lord as we have been made wise by heeding your prophets, help us to abide by your judgment. As we have been cleansed by the water of baptism, may we not fear to confess you as our God. When we are confronted with poverty, give us the courage to act to free those who want. When we are aware of the lonely, let us be quick to provide comfort and companionship. When others face death, may our presence bring courage and help to fill the void. Where pain hinders movement, give us compassion to console those who are afflicted. Let our actions cause all who hear of your love come to rejoice.

- 1) ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by Bill Bouknight
- 2) ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by David E. Leininger
- 3) ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by King Duncan