

December 15, 2013

“ARE YOU THE ONE?”

by Pastor Clarissa Martinelli

Matthew 11:2-11

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the 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.

As a child, and even now, I wait in high anticipation for Christmas. There are all the gifts, the bright lights hanging throughout the streets, the Christmas trees and wreath decorations, the cookies and hot chocolate, and the familiar Christmas songs and carols. Together, they offer up a cheerful image of a warm, safe, and comfortable season, where friends, neighbors, and family constantly surround us, and all is well.

But in our season of Advent all is not well. There is still pain and violence, still deep loss and grief, still loneliness, and still great need for warmth and food. For many, the stress, the dark nights, and the expectations of the holidays can make this season even more of a struggle. One may ask, does this season have anything to offer those places of our lives? Is there anything that those who are suffering, alone, or in need can look to with expectation and longing?

And because of this, preparation in the Church for Christ's coming doesn't always seem to relate to what the world is going through. Some people see the weeks before Christmas as something to endure more than enjoy. As Christians we look forward with joy. Or, do we? There's more depression and suicide around Christmas time than any other time of the year. There's something that keeps many people from really experiencing the joy of Christmas.

Even John the Baptist in our Gospel lesson today is down in the dumps. He's in a pretty scary situation when he sends his friends to confront Jesus. *“Are you the one?”* he asks.

I kind of think John saw himself as a blocker in a football game -- a blocker for the running back -- the Messiah. John was clearing the way through the defense, the obstacles, and opening up a path for the Messiah to score a victory over the enemy.

John had made some beautiful blocks... preaching his heart out, baptizing until he was waterlogged, even sacrificing his BODY blocking for the Messiah. But John looks back and the Messiah doesn't even seem to be running. Indeed, Jesus appears to have stopped and is helping some injured players, who are not even on his team! That's not what the Messiah should be doing! Should he?

The gospel of Matthew finds John behind bars. He might be thinking, "God, where did I go wrong? I did what I thought you wanted. I said what I thought you wanted me to say. You told me that Messiah was coming. But where is he?

"Where's the fire, the axe, the judgement he's supposed to bring? And why, if he were here, would he let me stay in this place? I thought I knew my cousin pretty well. I remember that day in the Jordan when I baptized him. What a glorious day. God, your whole plan was being put into play. But, where is he now? Why isn't he doing what I said he would do? Is he really the one, or should I look for another?"

This holiday season finds many people feeling like John might have: imprisoned, wondering to themselves, "Are you the One, Jesus? Can you speak to me in my prison? Behind my bars of pain? Are you the One? Or should we look for another?"

Many people find themselves in a prison called loneliness this time of year: Military personnel serving far from home. Shut-ins with few family and friends, even people who know lots of people and maybe even have a large family, but who strangely feel very much alone. You can be alone, you know, even in a Christmas crowd.

Lonely people often think nobody cares about what they need or think. People ask, "How are you doing?" but don't really want to take the time to listen to the answer. It seems that no one cares. In loneliness it's easy to wonder if even God cares. Are you the One, Jesus? Can you help us cut through these prison bars of loneliness? Or should we look for another?

Others find themselves imprisoned in a fortress of fear at Christmas: fear about the future, fear for their families, fear for their own health and well-being. John the Baptist must have felt fear as he waited day after day for word of his own fate. Or imagine the fear for the family whose main wage earner has just been laid off at Christmas! What's this going to do to the family? What about the future? It could be a lean Christmas for a family in that situation.

Are you the One, Jesus? Can you help us face and overcome our fears? Or should we look for another?

Christmas finds many people locked in prisons of grief. The loss of a parent, a grandparent, a child, or friend. A husband or wife who died during the year and won't be here for the holiday. The families of victims of the many tragic events this year. Can the light of Christmas penetrate such deep darkness? How can Christmas ever be the same?

Are you the One, Jesus? Can you bring light into this darkest of prison cells? Or should we look for another?

John the Baptist sent some of his followers to spy on Jesus, to ask this same question: Are you the one? And, basically, Jesus said, "Look around you at the evidence, and decide for yourselves. What does the evidence show?"

Have the blind received sight? Remember the blind man Jesus met on the road? Making a paste from the dust in the road, Jesus touched his eyes and his vision returned. Ask that man, "Is he the One?" And ask the millions of others who have been blind to the truth about themselves and about God, but who've found that Jesus opened their eyes. Ask them, "Is he the One?"

Have the lame walked? Go and ask the man whose friends lowered him through the roof on a mat before Jesus because the man was paralyzed. Ask him, if you can catch up with him, "Is he the One?" And ask the thousands whose feet never seemed strong enough to stay on the right paths but in Jesus have found the strength to turn around and walk with God. Ask them, "Is he the One?"

Have the prisoners been released? Ask that dying thief beside Jesus on the cross, who that very day knew paradise. Ask him, "Is he the One?" And ask the countless numbers who have found Jesus to be the liberator from the prison of drugs, greed, loneliness, and fear. Ask them, "Is he the One?"

But what of that greatest fear, that great prison? What of death? Matthew, who wrote today's gospel, would encourage us to ask the father whose daughter had died, who heard those simple words, "Little one, arise." Ask that father, "Is he the One?" And ask all those who have received in Jesus a resurrection from the dead, an abundant life, a new beginning. Ask them how much difference it makes facing death when the One who rose from the dead promises eternal life to all who believe in him. Ask them, "Is he the One?"

James 5:7-10

⁷Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Are you the One, Jesus? Can you speak to us behind our thick prison walls this Christmas? Can you give strength to our feet? sight to our eyes? hope to our hearts? wholeness to our brokenness? life to our death?

Are you the One, Jesus?

And, Jesus might answer, "Are YOU the one? I live in you. You are my body in today's world. It is through you that I can touch people's hearts, bring wholeness to their brokenness, and set them free to love. With your hands I can reach out to the lonely. With your words I can comfort the grieving. With your voice I can proclaim good news to the poor."

Jesus asks you today, "Are you the one, or am I to wait for another?"

Ask your pew neighbor – Are you the one?

Jesus body, hands, and feet?

Say YES – YES – YES

AMEN AMEN AMEN

Thanks to the Rev. Linda Kraft and the Rev. Bass Mitchell