

What Would Jesus Do?
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

On this Third Sunday of Advent we encounter again the strange character of John the Baptizer. In last week's lesson he was baptizing and preaching God's judgment upon all who would not repent in light of the coming kingdom of heaven. But in today's text his circumstances have changed drastically. John is in prison. He will likely be executed. He appears not nearly so confident in his mission or message. He wonders about the Messiah. At the end of the text, Jesus asks three questions intended to help people understand John.

- What did you expect out in the wilderness? A reed shaking in the wind, that is, someone quivering in fear? No, of course not.
- Did you expect someone living the soft life? No, of course not. Folks like that live in palaces.
- Did you expect a prophet? Yes. Prophecy, so important to Israel's self-understanding, had been dead for almost three centuries. John was a prophet, speaking and acting for God.

In effect, Jesus was saying: "Don't you get it? Do you not understand how important John is? Then understand that the kingdom of heaven which I bring changes things so much that the least in the kingdom is greater than John." That's not putting down John. That's lifting up everyone who belongs to the kingdom of heaven. We'll reflect on this by asking the question in my sermon's title: what would Jesus do? Let's read it in Matthew 11.

Matthew 11.2-11 (NRSV)

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

What Jesus Does Is Who Jesus Is

In his confusion, John the Baptizer wants to know who Jesus really is. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John's basic problem was that Jesus wasn't behaving as

John expected a Messiah to behave and that is not just John's problem. Everyone, including you and me, tends to form Jesus in our own image. Who is Jesus? He seems to be many things to many people. In a book entitled *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey cites how different groups speak of Jesus. Yancey writes, "The Lakota tribe, for example, refers to Jesus as 'the buffalo calf of God.' The Cuban government distributes a painting of Jesus with a carbine slung over his shoulder. During the wars of religion with France, the English used to shout, 'The pope is French but Jesus Christ is English.'"

Yancey also notes that modern scholarship further muddies the picture. Peruse academic books about Jesus available in most seminary bookstores and you will encounter various portraits of Jesus: a political revolutionary, a magician who married Mary Magdalene, a Galilean charismatic, a rabbi, a peasant Jewish cynic, a Pharisee, an anti-Pharisee Essene, an eschatological prophet, a 'hippie in a world of Augustan yuppies', and a hallucinogenic leader of a sacred mushroom cult. "Serious scholars write these works with little sign of embarrassment," says Yancey.

Athletes also come up with "creative" portrayals of Jesus. Norm Evans, former Miami Dolphins lineman, wrote in his book, *On God's Squad*, 'I guarantee you Christ would be the toughest guy who ever played this game. If he were alive today I would picture a six-foot-six-inch, 260-pound defensive tackle who would always make the big plays and would be hard to keep out of the backfield for offensive linemen like myself.' Fritz Peterson, former New York Yankee, more easily fancies Jesus in a baseball uniform: 'I firmly believe that if Jesus Christ was sliding into second base, he would knock the second baseman to left field to break up the double play. Christ might not throw a spitball, but he would play hard within the rules.'"¹

Who is Jesus? He seems to be whoever people want him to be. Yet we cannot dismiss the question because so much depends on the answer. It is really an Advent question.

When John asked who he was, Jesus pointed to what he did. He said, "Tell John what you see and hear." Then he quoted the prophet Isaiah to the effect that the Messiah brings good news and touches peoples lives with the presence of God, no matter their condition, no matter if they are blind or sick or in jail. The Messiah means that God comes to us and stays with us — no matter what.

John needed a new understanding of Messiah. The real Messiah was not someone who magically fixed every problem. The real Messiah brings the presence of God even when life is tough — as life often is. And there is a blessing if we are not offended by the real Messiah.²

Let me try to bring this home with a story that Anne Lamott wrote a few years ago. This is an adult story with some inelegant details but it's true, and true to life. Anne was particularly discouraged about finding hope one Advent. She trusted Jesus but she wanted him to fix more of her

¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 19.

² Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching, Year A* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 26-27. "What John needs is a new understanding of who the Messiah in reality is, what sort of work the Messiah does, and with what sort of people he does it. Jesus acknowledges that such a new understanding may be hard to come by. He pronounces a beatitude on the person who takes no offense at him (11:6). Seeing and hearing that Jesus is preoccupied with people who have been marginalized by their situations, who can do little or nothing for themselves, may represent a threat to some and prevent their accepting Jesus as Messiah. Like John, they expect that the Messiah should be doing more about stopping crime and punishing criminals. They would prefer to wait for another in hopes of finding a leader more to their liking. Jesus alone, however, defines his own messiahship."

problems more quickly. Like John the Baptizer, Anne was wondered about Jesus and what he would our could do. Is Jesus really the one? Or are we to wait for another? So she talked to several people about it, finally asking a Catholic friend named Tom. Tom is an alcoholic, sober now for 22 years. Anne said to him, “Tell me a story about Advent. Tell me about people getting well.”

Tom thought for a while. Then he said, “Okay, I’ll tell you about myself.”

In 1976 when Tom first got sober, he was living in Berkeley, California. The people going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings there seemed to be very hip. They were addicted but in many ways had their lives together. No so in Los Angeles, where Tom was soon transferred. “It was a nightmare,” he said. “I was afraid to go into entire areas of L.A., because the only places I knew were the bars.” So he asked a priest to help him and the priest connected him with a man named Terry.

It turns out that Terry was not easy to talk with. He was clumsy and ill at ease, an introvert with no social skills, but the priest said he was good with newly sober people. So off Tom goes with Terry to an A.A. meeting near skid row, where — in Tom’s words — “all these awful looking alkie are hanging out in the yard, waiting for a meeting to start. I’m tense, I’m just staring. It’s a whole bunch of strangers, all of them clearly very damaged — working their way back slowly, but not yet real attractive. The people back in Berkeley AA all seem like David Niven in comparison, and I’m thinking, *Who are these people? Why am I here?*”

After awhile Terry directed Tom to a long flight of stairs heading up to a windowless, airless room. He started walking up the stairs, with his jaws clenched, muttering to himself tensely just like the guy in front of him, a guy Tom’s own age who was stumbling and numb and maybe not yet quite on his first day of sobriety.

“The only things getting me up the stairs,” said Tom, “were Terry, behind me, pushing me forward every so often, and this conviction I have that this is as bad as it’s ever going to be — that if I can get through this, I can get through anything.”

But all of a sudden, the man in front of Tom soiled himself. He was so sick that he lost complete control of his bowels. It was a mess — things had just gotten much worse — and all Tom could do was stumble up the stairs, trying not to breathe.

At the top was a greeter who stood at the door saying hello. He got one whiff of the man in front of Tom and threw up all over everything. Things were getting worse still. There was total pandemonium in the room, no one knew what to do. But then Terry, socially awkward Terry, finally got into the room. He just reached out to the greeter who had thrown up, put his hand on the man’s shoulder, and just said, “Wow. Looks like you got caught by surprise.” And they both laughed.

Then Terry asked a couple of guys to go with him down the hall to help this guy get cleaned up. When that was done Terry approached the other man, the one who had soiled himself.

“My friend,” he said gently, “it looks like you have trouble here.” The man just nodded.

“We’re going to give you a hand,” said Terry, and three men from the recovery house next door helped him to his feet, walked him to the halfway house, and put him in the shower. They washed his clothes and shoes and gave him their things to wear while he waited. They gave him coffee and dinner, and they gave him respect. They did not cast this other guy off for not being well enough to be there. Somehow this broken guy was treated like one of them, because they could see that he was one of them. No one pretended he was other than he was, but there was a real sense of kinship.

Tom concluded to Anne, “I was just totally amazed by what I had seen. [Afterwards] I had a little shred of hope. I couldn’t have put it into words, but until that meeting, I had thought that I would recover with men and women like myself; which is to say, overeducated, fun to be with and housebroken. And that this would happen quickly and efficiently. But I was wrong. So I’ll tell you what the promise of Advent is: It is that God has set up a tent among us and will help us work together on our stuff. And this will only happen over time.”³

Conclusion

Friends, we sing “O come, O come Emmanuel.” We sing because we know we need God. The truth is that Emmanuel has come. We are greater than John because we can see this, if we have the eyes to see it. We can see the truth of the real Messiah. God is with us. Emmanuel continues to come, even when we mess up life, which we often do. The real Messiah, the one we can trust, comes not to magically fix us, but to stay with us, and to help us work on our stuff.

What does Jesus do?

He comes.

He stays.

He helps.

Thanks be to God.

³ Anne Lamott, “My Advent Adventure,” online, <http://www.salon.com>, Internet, 10 Dec. 1998.