“ARE YOU THE ONE?”

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Texts: Matthew 11:1-6 and Isaiah 35:1-10

Are you the one, or are we to wait for another? It seems an odd question from the lips of John the Baptist. You remember John – the guy with camel hair clothes and the Desert diet of bugs and honey.

He is the voice crying in the wilderness, “Repent, for the Kingdom of

heaven is at hand;”

the prophet telling of the one to come who “is so great that I am not

worthy to untie his sandals;”

the baptizer who hesitated to baptize Jesus, but when he did saw the

heavens open up and a divine voice proclaim, “This is my

beloved Son with whom I am well pleased;”

the cousin of Jesus who leapt in his mother’s womb at the sound of

Mary’s voice.

If anyone other than Mary and Joseph knew who Jesus was – who he really was – surely it was John. How could John not know when he spent his life preparing the way for him? Yet, sitting in a dark, dank prison with no crowds to preach to, John begins to wonder. He hears about all that Jesus is doing, yet doubts creep in about his cousin and who he really is; so, John sends his disciples to ask Jesus this question: Are you the One? Are you the One who is to come, the One for whom John has been preparing the way, the Messiah for whom we’ve been waiting, or are we to wait for another?

It’s not like there was another One waiting in the wings. John doesn’t seem drawn toward any other candidate for whom to prepare the way. No one else seems to have MESSIAH stamped on his resume or forehead. But clarity would be helpful to John as he contemplates his life’s work. Jesus is doing great stuff – preaching, teaching, healing, even stilling a storm – good God kind of stuff. Yet, John wonders, is it really Messiah kind of stuff? Is Jesus the One for whom he is preparing the way?

John is looking for the One who is the messiah, a savior, one who will free the people from oppression and bring in a new world order. All of Israel was waiting for that kind of Messiah. To this day, the Jews who do not believe in Jesus will point to the prophecies and ask, “Where is the new world order? Where are the wolf and the lamb lying down together? Where is the host of angels that are to come with the Messiah and establish the reign of God?” John must have wondered something of the same thing. He had heard about the powerful acts that Jesus had done, the signs that pointed to him as the anointed one of God. Yet, Jesus was still something of an enigma – a Messiah who came to deliver the people from something other than Roman rule. Perhaps that is what troubled John and led him to ask Jesus, “Are you the One or is there another?”

Perhaps you have had those same doubts yourself. Jesus comes into the world to a chorus of glorias from angel choirs; creation celebrates his birth with a shining star that guides the Wisemen to his side. Rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, come on bended knee to worship him in Bethlehem. And then – the angels stop singing, the star stops shining, the Wisemen go back to the East, the shepherds return to the fields, and life goes back to the way it was on the eve of that silent night. Jesus is born, but for thirty years he seems strangely silent. Might the Wisemen have returned from the East to ask the young man, Jesus, “Are you the one?” Might the shepherds have wondered the same thing as they kept watch over their flocks by night after night after night across those thirty years? Then comes John to prepare the way, confident that Jesus is the One until in prison he begins to doubt. “Are you the One, or is there another?”

Most of us would prefer that Jesus answer this question with a direct statement. We want him to say, “Yes! I am the One! I am the anointed one sent to deliver you from your sins. I am the One of whom the prophets spoke. I am the Messiah of God!” But that is not what Jesus says. In John’s gospel he says, “I am the good shepherd… I am the vine… I am the way, the truth, and the life….” Yet, he will not say, “I am the Messiah of God.” When the high priest directs him under oath, “tell us if you are the Messiah?” Jesus replies, “You have said so.” (MT 26:64) When Pilate asks, “Are you a king?” he offers the same reply. (LK 23:3) When the Jews in Jerusalem beg him, “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly,” he replies, “I have told you, and you do not believe.” (JN 10:25)

I once had a Labor Law class with a professor who refused to answer any question directly. You could ask, “Is it raining outside?” and she would reply, “What do you think?” By the end of the term, our class was pretty fed up with it, so when I asked a fairly straightforward question seeking a simple “yes or no” answer and the professor replied, “What do you think?” I made the mistake of saying, somewhat tartly, “I’ll tell you if you tell me.” This was a really bad idea; for she made it crystal clear to me, that she did know the answer and that my job, was to figure it out for myself.

Jesus seems to be offering a similar message for all of us – you have to figure this out for yourself. When John sends his disciples to ask, “Are you the One?” Jesus sends them back with this message,

*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 preached to them.*

All those signs point to the Messiah foretold by Isaiah in those words you heard me read earlier this morning. What Jesus tells John is, “Given what you’ve seen and heard, what do you think – or rather, what do you believe?” Jesus isn’t the Messiah simply because he says he is. He is the Messiah because he is who he is, and what he ***does*** bears testimony to his calling. More is required of John and of us than simply waiting for an affirmative response from Jesus. What is required is an act of faith. We look at the signs that testify to his power and conclude, he is the One!

The word in Greek for miracle is the same as that for signs – the miracles of Jesus are signs that point us to who he is. The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the sick are healed, Lazarus is raised, the poor receive hope – those are signs of the Messiah of whom Isaiah spoke! And yet he is not the kind of Messiah that was long-expected. The shadow of the cross falls on his manger bed, the tomb cannot hold him, the risen Lord appears to his disciples – those too are signs of the Messiah, a different Messiah, one who will suffer and die and rise again to save God’s people from much more than the hands of Rome. “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me,” says Jesus. Blessed are those who believe that I am the One. Blessed are those who have seen and heard and believed. Blessed are those who have not seen, and still believe.

We are among those so blessed, among those who do not give up on him because he did not throw out the Romans and establish a political kingdom on earth. We are among those blessed with the good news of a savior who lived, died, and rose again for us. We are blessed with the testimony of the gospel writers and of Paul and of the saints across two thousand years and of the saints who sat in these very pews and of the saints who sit here still and affirm, “He is the One!” We are blessed with a God who is alive and at work in our midst, a God who pours out the Spirit on infants and children and teens and adults alike to empower us to do what we could not do alone. We are indeed blessed, and the blessing is this: to know the answer to the question, “Are you the One?” For he is, and he was, and he will be – the One – the Messiah who is Christ the Lord! He is the One whose birth we celebrate and whose return we await this Advent Season.

In his novel *Avenue of Mysteries*, John Irving says through his character Dolores: “*In every life, I think there’s always a moment when you must decide where you belong*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) For us as Christians it is that moment when we give answer to the question posed by John, “Is Jesus the One or should we wait for another?” In saying, “HE is the one!” we declare where we belong – we belong with him – with him in the night in Bethlehem, with him on the roads of Galilee, at the cross on Calvary, at the empty tomb, and in the upper room at Pentecost, and confident that he is with us today, day after day after day, we declare that we belong with him and he with us. For HE IS THE ONE, THE MESSIAH, THE SAVIOR, OUR LORD! - just as the angel said:

*To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord! Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace to all God’s people* - even to you and to me, peace! Amen

1. Dolores in *Avenue of Mysteries*, John Irving, Simon & Schuster, 2015, p.394 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)