

“Is This the One Who Is To Come?” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey  
Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA) December 16, 2007

*John the Baptist was the one who mentored and taught his cousin, Jesus, who baptized him, and who preached repentance in his name, with the threat of winnowing forks and unquenchable fire. Now, two years later, he has been imprisoned for speaking truth to power: he called out Herod Antipas for claiming his own brother's wife. From his cell, he voices his doubts:*

TEXT: Matthew 11:2-11 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 offence 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.

A FEW WEEKS AGO I was with a friend as she looked for a perfect birthday card for her new husband. She picked up a promising one that read: "Sweetheart, you're the answer to my prayers." Then she turned to the inside, which was inscribed: "You're not what I prayed for exactly, but apparently you are the answer."

In a strange way, I imagine that something like that was running through John's mind as he sat there in that prison. He's had lots of time to think. He's had lots of time to realize that Jesus is not acting the way the Messiah - according to John - should act.

He and his people had hoped and prayed for years for a Messiah, one anointed by God to lead the nation, a deliverer who would vanquish occupying forces, conquer all enemies, establish a great kingdom, and usher in an era of peace and prosperity. Less than two years earlier, John had come to believe that the prayers had been answered. The Messiah was none other than his own cousin, Jesus of Nazareth.

But instead of a pit bull, Jesus behaves more like a puppy; instead of a German Shepherd, he is the Good Shepherd, changing hearts with warmth and affection. Rather than blazing with the fire of indignation, Jesus is telling stories and playing with children. Rather than railing against the sins of the world, Jesus is eating with tax collectors and prostitutes and poor people. Rather than tossing people into the blistering cauldron of hell, he is listening to them, forgiving them, and changing them from the inside out. John preached fire and brimstone in the manner of the prophets of Israel; Jesus preached "love one another." Jesus saw the world in terms of reversals, a world where the old rules do not apply. In the current reality, John the Baptist has been the greatest prophet. In the coming world, even the least will be greater than John.

Disappointed, bewildered, maybe even angry, no wonder John asks the question: "Is this the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Have any of you had that same question – is Jesus really the One, the Messiah? Although you all look so open, so confident, so faith-filled, here on Sunday morning, I've talked to most of you individually. I know beneath the skins of many of you there is planted the seed of honest doubt. Perhaps you do not share these feelings with anyone; but your doubts, your uncertainties, your skepticism are there, and they are real. Most of us at times have cried out "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.... Are you really the One who is to come?"

This is a question that Jesus takes seriously. In fact, it doesn't seem to surprise him! The Latin root of the word "question" means "to seek." It's where we get the word "quest." To ask a real question is to enter on a journey. Faith is the watchword of the church, but doubt is often the way in. Remember Rainer Maria Rilke's answers to a young poet with questions about his art. In one of his replies, Rilke writes, "Love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language" .Live the questions now. Perhaps then someday far in the future, you will gradually...live your way into the answer."

So Jesus did not take offense at the question – yours or John's. But neither does he give a straight answer.

"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." Jesus offers words right out of the prophet Isaiah, words of hope to an oppressed people, a declaration that they were not alone; their God was with them. Instead of speaking about his identity, instead of defending himself or arguing the point, Jesus offers evidence of God's work, miracles springing up from the soil of Jesus' ministry, and then adds, almost wistfully, "Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me. Or another translation says, "does not fall away because of me." Or quite literally from the Greek "And blessed is anyone who is not SCANDALIZED by me."

Jesus knew John's dilemma: "You prayed for an answer, but I am not the one you imagined." Jesus knows the Hebrew people did not always know what to make of him. It is our dilemma as well. And he says, Hang in there with me, trust me, see what is happening little by little, and know that peace and wholeness is truly God's will, God's intention, for the world. But it won't come by military might or political power.

"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" If you can get beyond the "deus ex machina" in a Greek play, the God who arrives to magically fix things and make everything all right; then perhaps you can hear that Jesus says, "It is the wrong question. Don't be concerned with me: Look at what is happening! If the world is in turmoil, am I bringing some solution? If you follow me, is there hope? If you join me on the way, won't you be part of that solution?"

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor imagines Jesus' answer this way.

"People who were blind to the love have received their sight; people who were paralyzed with fear are limber with hope; people who were deaf from want of good news are singing hymns. And best and most miraculous of all, tell John that this is not the work of one lonely Messiah but the work of God, carried out by all who believe, and there is no end in sight. Tell him I am the one, if you must, but tell him also that yes, he should look for another, and another, and another. Tell him to search every face for the face of God and not get tripped up on me, because what is happening here is bigger than any of us. What is coming to pass is as big as the Kingdom of God."

You are in this too. You have a part to play in making these hopes real.

John says, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus turns and looks at each of us and says, "Are you the one? Are you the one?"

There is a wonderful parable that tells us what "prophecy actualized" might look like in our lives. There was once a woman who was disappointed, who was disillusioned, who was depressed. She wanted a good world, a peaceful world, and she wanted to be a good person. But the newspaper and television showed her how far we were from such a reality. So she decided to go shopping. She went to the mall and wandered into a new store - where the person behind the counter looked strangely like Jesus. Gathering up her courage she went up to the counter and asked, "Are you Jesus?" "Well, yes, I am," the man answered. "Do you work here?" "Actually," Jesus responded, "I own the store. You are free to wander up and down the aisles, see what it is I sell, and then make a list of what you want. When you are finished, come back here, and we'll see what we can do for you."

So, the woman did just that. And what she saw thrilled her. There was peace on earth, no more war, no hunger or poverty, peace in families, no more drugs, harmony, clean air. She wrote furiously and finally approached the counter, handing a long list to Jesus. He skimmed the paper, and then smiling at her said, "No problem." Reaching under the counter, he grabbed some packets and laid them out on the counter. Confused, she asked, "What are these?" Jesus replied: "These are seed packets. You see, this is a catalogue store." Surprised the woman blurted out, "You mean I don't get the finished product?" "No," Jesus gently responded. "This is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like, and I give you the seeds. Then you plant the seeds. You go home and nurture them and help them to grow and someone else reaps the benefits." "Oh," she said, deeply disappointed in Jesus. Then she turned around and left the store without buying anything.

Friends, I believe that our passage for today speaks to us about our calling as Christians in a world of violence, in a world of increasing poverty, in a world of terrorism and intolerance. As disciples of Jesus, our text for today is calling us to follow him as those who embrace his prophetic vocation. Yes, we are called to criticize when necessary. Even more, we are called to energize the world with hopeful visions of a new social order. But most of all, we are called to actualize Jesus' passionate dream of a whole and healed

world. We are called to actualize God's creative plan by the way we live our daily lives.

We are still in Advent. We are in that December darkness, but the light, of hope and promise is growing. While we wait for the fullness of God's realm, my friends, let's pick up those packets of seeds. And let's plant them - for the sake of ourselves, for our children and for all the children of the world.

Amen.