



January 3, 2017

*feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)*

Dear Church Family,

In our New Year's Day service, I focused on the other baby in the nativity story we have just celebrated, John the Baptist. John was the prophet who would prepare a people for the Lord and his main message was one of coming judgment and the need to take sin seriously. So, with regard to our series on Judgment, John is a reminder to us of just how foundational an awareness of God's righteous judgment is to being followers of Christ.

John is also a reminder of Stuart's Advent focus that the birth narrative begins in a context of unanswered prayer. When you pay attention to the time frames of the prophecies that are being fulfilled, you realize that there had been a long wait for those prayers to be answered. Stuart observed that "the theology of asking had taken a real beating for a long time." And this was true personally for Zechariah and Elizabeth with their unanswered prayers for a child. Zechariah's own response to the news that Elizabeth would bear him a son indicates that he had given up hope. *How shall I know this?* He was afraid to hope again in a context that held such disappointment. And do we blame him?

In the midst of the Christmas story is the experience of unanswered prayer. From Stuart's pastoral letter "No jaunty jingle will serve to provide healing balm or resolution for an unanswered asker who feels caught in the no-man's land between the request and the response. The longer the answer is in coming, the more that space is marked out by emotional and theological barbed wire."

John the Baptist, the joyful answer to the long unanswered prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth, faced his own no-man's land of unanswered prayer in his own life. John's life is a picture of the contrariness that was the theme of Stuart's Christmas poem. In a short time, he went from being a revered prophet to languishing in Herod's prison for calling Herod out on the sinfulness of his marriage to his brother's divorced wife, Herodius. From Stuart's poem, "This face pressed on the hard floor, was head first in the clouds. One minute I was bridal, the next I'm choosing shrouds." I like to believe that Zechariah and Elizabeth did not live to endure the tragic ending of John's life which began with such joy for them.

We have a picture into John's own struggle with his situation in Luke 7:18-23 when from prison he sends his disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" This is a startling question in Luke's story. We see that the religious leaders have had difficulty recognizing Jesus, but here is John, the one sent to prepare the way for Jesus, having difficulty as well. John recognized Jesus when they were both in utero, leaping for joy in the womb when Mary visits Elizabeth. How can it be that John has trouble recognizing Jesus as Messiah now? Because of where John finds himself. He is in prison for calling Herod to repentance. John was expecting Jesus as Messiah to come and bring divine justice. John expected the Christ to bring the final judgment on evil and all who oppose God. But Jesus had not brought the expected judgment and John is the clearest, most glaring example of that because he is still in prison while Herod continues to rule. The Messiah John expected would execute judgment (the coming wrath) against the unrepentant sinner Herod.

Verses 21 and 22 are the response to John's question. The healing and deliverance miracles of Jesus are highlighted. It says "*in that hour*" which is a picture of Jesus performing these miracles right in front of John's disciples. These are all things that are talked about in the book of Isaiah as characteristic of the Messianic age to come. This is the evidence that he is the coming one. Yet, this answer does not directly address John's confusion. He has already heard about all these things. And they have caused him to think that Jesus is the coming one, but what about the missing judgment? What about his situation?

Jesus does acknowledge that John has reason to be confused when he says "*Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.*" Jesus not meeting John's expectations is a possible area for John to stumble. John is faced with either accepting that Jesus is Messiah and reorienting those expectations around Him, or rejecting Him and hanging on to the expectations. For John, this is much more than an issue of theology. In the two previous stories, a gentile centurion is helped with his sick servant and the widow is helped with her dire life situation. Meanwhile, John hears about these things while still in prison. Where is the help for him? Why is his situation being ignored? John, who has more claim to allegiance and connection to Jesus than anyone else in the story, is languishing in prison while others receive the benefits of Jesus' power as Messiah.

What does John need at this point in his life? How would you pray for him? As the Spark kids reminded us, we would persevere in asking for his release from prison. Yet that is a prayer that God did not answer in John's earthly life. In Mark 6 we get the story of John being beheaded when Herodius traps Herod with his ill-advised oath to her daughter Salome. What a lousy way for a prophet of the Lord to lose his life. From an earthly perspective, it is hard to see God's hand in any of this. In fact, it is more likely to be seen as a mockery of John having anything to do with a loving and powerful God.

Mark chooses to tell this story in great detail in the middle of the account of the disciples moving in supernatural healing and deliverance ministry. This is a deliberate and jarring contrast. A strange combination of power and vulnerability. But this is exactly the combination that Jesus did bring as Messiah, the suffering servant. Yes, he brought the power of God to heal and deliver, but this was not the full kingdom of God. There would still be suffering, even and especially amongst his people with Jesus being the prime example. What does this mean for us today as we begin a new calendar year and celebrate communion? The power of healing and deliverance is in the world and we have that power in us through the Holy Spirit. We celebrate the body and blood of Jesus that has made that all possible for us in our lives. Jesus did works of healing to show the world who he was and so did his disciples. Our world needs to know who Jesus is so we are asking Jesus to reveal himself to the world through physical healing and deliverance in our day in this New Year.

But we will also have our experiences of unanswered prayer (for ourselves and those we love). This will be true even if we see an outpouring of physical healing in our midst. Experiences that we can stumble over and threaten our faith. It might even get harder for people, as I suspect it was for John, to hear about answered prayer for others. We must call to mind Hebrews 4:15-16, *we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Jesus went through the experience of feeling forsaken by God. He can strengthen our faith through our own areas of unanswered prayer. He can guide us so that we do not fall away but discover God afresh in the midst of whatever trials we face this year.

Pastorally Yours,

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