

Prayer for Enlightenment

O Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

In 1848 construction began on a railroad through a portion of the Alps called “The Semmering.” The goal was to connect Vienna with Venice, allowing for easy transportation of goods and people from the coast to the interior of Europe.

Many said it could not be done.

The mountains were too steep.

The risk of avalanche too great.

The winter months too difficult for construction.

Still, the project’s designer, Carl von Ghega, pressed on.

Seven years later the Semmering rail line was complete.

It was made up of 14 tunnels, 16 viaducts, 100 stone arches, and 11 bridges.

20,000 workers constructed this line...700 of them died.

I am impressed that this daunting project was completed...but even more amazing to me is that when the Semmering alpine pass was being built, there was no train capable of making the trip through the Alps. No existing train could handle the steep elevation or the sharp turns through the mountains.

Four different locomotives were tried and all four failed. Finally the train companies designed and built a new locomotive capable of traveling that mountain pass.

Those 20,000 workers from Austria, Italy, and Germany came together day after day after day in miserable conditions to build a track for a train that did not yet exist.

I think those construction workers truly believed, deep in their bones, that *someday* a train would come.

It takes a lot of hope to live like that.

There are days when I have that much hope.

There are days when I have that much hope that the locomotive will come.

But there are other days where hope feels out of reach, days where the rug has been pulled out from under me, days where I am more like John the Baptist in our text for today.

Disappointed...

John the Baptist knew disappointment. John is in prison now and he's looking for a sign - a sign that the long-awaited Messiah has really arrived.

I find that ironic. John the Baptist is the one who first proclaimed Jesus’ coming.

But much has happened to John since we last saw him preaching and baptizing people in the wilderness.

You'll remember John's message was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Actually, John's message was more like REPENT!

This message burned in John's soul. John wasn't afraid to proclaim his message to religious leaders and royalty alike. He wasn't even afraid to proclaim it to King Herod himself.
That was why he was in jail.

King Herod had seduced and later married his brother's wife, but first he killed his brother.
John the Baptist condemned the king's behavior and was promptly placed in prison.
I think while he was in prison John realized that his career as a prophet was over.
His life will also soon be over.

In those days, prisoners waited for one of three results.
They were exonerated, exiled, or executed.
Since John had condemned the king, he was unlikely to be found not-guilty and freed. I think the best John the Baptist could hope for was to be exiled...and even that possibility seems remote.

John was in prison. As the days and weeks passed, it became increasingly clear that Jesus was not going to do anything to get John OUT of prison.

No political revolution was on the horizon that could lead to John's pardon and release.

Jesus was active in ministry. John heard many reports and rumors about what Jesus was doing in Galilee. Yet the simple fact was that Jesus was out in the sticks of Galilee (kind of a Biblical North Dakota), quietly performing a ministry that no one in their wildest imagination would describe as fiery or revolutionary.

I think John knew he would be executed.
And I think he had one final request...
He wanted to know if he had wasted his life.
I don't blame him. I would want to know the very same if I were in John's place.

John had given everything.
He wanted to know, has it all been in vain?
Was it all an illusion - a dream?
In the wilderness John had believed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, but in the face of certain death he has some doubts.
He wants to know for sure...he wants to be certain.

So he sends some of his followers to find Jesus and ask him, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

Things were not working out like John had expected.
Sometimes that happens.
Disappointment.

Particularly at Christmas.
This is not an easy time of year.
In the 1970's, Merle Haggard had a #1 Country Hit titled "If we make it through December...."

Some of us live the meaning of those words... "If we make it through December...."
It was that kind of December for John the Baptist.

John's question seems simple enough, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" As is so often the case, Jesus replies indirectly.

Jesus replies using imagery from Isaiah...

The blind will see...

The lame will walk...

Lepers are cleansed...

The deaf will hear...

The dead are raised...

The poor are cared for...

Jesus' response is on the mark theologically.

Indeed he is fulfilling the old prophecies from Isaiah...in fact Jesus responds by paraphrasing Isaiah.

But if I were John sitting in a prison, I would think, "Good for the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the temporarily dead, and the poor. You may notice, however, Jesus, that I am still in prison. What about me?"

Jesus answers John by quoting from Isaiah. His quote is an assortment of verses from throughout Isaiah. John would have known and recognized that.

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I think John would have noticed something more.... If you read through these passages you will find the consistent theme of healing the sick, caring for the poor AND releasing of prisoners.

But Jesus does not quote that section of Isaiah...He says nothing about the prisoners being released. I'm sure that John noticed that.

What about me Jesus?

I am in prison...and Isaiah says that we-prisoners will be released. What about me?

I don't think that it was only the prison cell that made John the Baptist ask these questions. There was something about Jesus himself.

Something did not add up in the way he expected.

Jesus does not fit John's idea of a Messiah.

Jesus was not acting the way John thought a Savior would act...Where is the band of disciple-commandos coming to rescue his first disciple...now in prison?

This lamb-of-God who takes away the sin of the world was not taking away Herod's sin.

That would be a nice start...thinks John.

I think the enigmatic answer John gets says, in effect, "John, I cannot answer for you. You must decide on your own whether I am real. Look at the evidence. What do you see?"

Which, of course, is precisely the same question that we must answer for ourselves.

"Are you the one...or shall we wait for another?"

But life is not what we expect.

Life can be painful;

those we love suffer;
some of us are treated unfairly;
relationships tear, leaving hurt and scars;
children die;
dear ones become ill, unable to live a full life;
some of us struggle for the basics of life...food, clean water, warm homes.

“Are you the one...or shall we wait for another?”
The answer we hear back goes something like this:

Lives are changed.

Some people start over in a new direction. They leave the old ways behind and move in different ways and in different directions (remember that’s the definition of repent).

We, as a community of faith, see and support and encourage this by mentoring, supplying needs, giving Christmas gifts, providing food, helping with housing.

All in my name.

Yes, some folks are ungrateful and selfish and working the system...but others genuinely, desperately, claw, their way, slowly to new life...and you are there to help them...in my name.

Lives are changed.

The sick are loved and fed and cared-for by their church family.

Even when those we love die, we accompany them with singing into your hands, trusting in your love, as we love those remaining behind. Again, in my name.

Lives are changed.

We give money and support to unknown people in the far-flung reaches of the world.

Feeding the hungry every Wednesday morning.

Giving the Thanksgiving Day turkey and fixings to those in need.

Supporting UMCOR social workers and disaster-relief workers responding to natural disasters

And more...

In my name...

Are you the one...or shall we wait for another?

Lives are changed...sometimes in dramatic, even miraculous fashion.

But...more often...the changes are small, ordinary, unlikely to make the headlines, but every bit as real, nonetheless.

Lives are changed.

We study and wrestle and, yes, sometimes we argue about the meaning and intent of your word to us.

These words can seem contrary, difficult, and obtuse.

Yet these same words comfort and soothe and guide us in our relationships with you and with one another.

As we learn and grow in our understanding, lives are changed.

We learn to hear your voice amid the din of life.

All of this and more...in my name.

Are you the one...or shall we wait for another?

John’s question becomes our question.

Jesus is not what we expect...maybe not even what we think we want.

Yet the evidence is in.

We don't know it all.
We may have some doubts.
But we do know enough.

Are you the one...or shall we wait for another?
The response we hear goes something like this:

I cannot answer for you.
You must decide on your own whether I am real.
Look at the evidence.
 the blind receive their sight,
 the lame walk,
 those with skin diseases are cleansed,
 the deaf hear,
 the dead are raised,
 and the poor have good news brought to them
What do you see?
Who do you say I am?
Am I the one?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.