

The Mystery of God's dwelling transforms our darkness into Joy

December 15th 2013

Matt. 11:2,3 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Are you the One? Is Jesus the One? Have you ever asked that question? Have you asked that question from a dark place? Is Jesus the One who will make things right when there is no immediate or obvious evidence to support such a claim?

This week we approach the darkest night of the year, often symbolic for us of the dark, painful places in our own lives. John the Baptist was in a dark place.

John was in prison.

The question he asks, "Are you the One?"

is the most important question he can ask. The answer may confirm or negate everything so far for which he has lived.

His ascetic life in the wilderness

including the human realities of thirst, hunger, discomfort, all because he has been compelled to preach, not just preach, proclaim, a message of preparation to the people.

Prepare the Way of the anointed One, the messiah, the one who is coming to bring justice, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, gathering the grain and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Herod Antipas does not want to hear this kind of condemnation of his deeds and choices particularly with regard to his relationship with his brother's wife and so puts John into prison.

Prisons in most countries in most times are notoriously hard places to be – stating the obvious of course. Prisons restrict freedom, are designed to be uncomfortable, are often not safe.

In prison John has already paid a high price for living the life he's been called to live.

He will yet pay with his life, when a few chapters later we hear that Herod executes him.

Before that happens, he needs to know the answer to his question.

“Are you the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Why would he ask? Is Jesus not doing the things that even John expected Jesus to do?

If the Messiah that he proclaimed was supposed to be the one who would inaugurate a time of justice and God's reign – maybe John's trying to see the evidence. But it's hard to see in the dark.

this question - Are you the One?

for John the Baptist - it is a life and death question.

As we await Christ's coming in this season of Advent, and as we move in and out of awareness of the very real darkness of our own lives and our own time, I would claim that it is still as much a life and death question today. Recently four veterans of the Afghan war succumbed to the lie told by their particular darkness that life is not worth living. But there are so many forms of darkness. Biblically speaking this kind of darkness

is often referred to as “the principalities and powers” and they are legion. The shadows of these powers can creep into personal lives, families, institutions and entire global systems and in all these places the shadows have one thing in common. The darkness created by them makes it really hard to see.

If it lasts too long or becomes too deep we might find ourselves believing that the darkness is more powerful than the light and this can lead to despair.

Is this where John the Baptist’s question came from?

Let’s listen to how Jesus answers the question.

Go and tell John, or if we want to hear it as something addressed to of us

Go and tell anyone who needs to know,

what you hear and see.

the blind receive their sight

the deaf hear,

the dead are raised

and the poor have good news brought to them.

He can’t just say, Yes, I’m the messiah, I’m the One you were waiting for because to have done that would have left interpretation of what the “messiah” was and would do up to John or up to us.

Interpretation of whom or what the messiah is - is not up to us.

It was and always has been up to the One who reveals his identity through his actions.

Go and tell anyone who needs to know
what you hear
and see
The blind receive their sight
the deaf hear
the dead are raised
and the poor have good news brought to them.
and
Blessed is the one who takes no offence at me.

Why would he say, “Blessed is the one who takes no offence at me?”
Who could take offence at this kind of reign, these kinds of actions?
I guess the ones who wanted to hear and see something else.
Justice without mercy perhaps,
or maybe there’s a hint a few verses later,
From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Reign of heaven has
suffered violence and the violent take it by force. Maybe those who
would rather take it by force are the ones who are offended that Jesus
heals, and resurrects and preaches good news to the poor and doesn’t
take it by force himself or make things right in an instant.
Or those who take offense are those who think that the current Pope
Francis should speak only about “the moral and religious and spiritual
deficit that we have to work on but not damage the economy in the
process.” (a quote by Larry Kudlow) as if the economy was an amoral
entity and immune from the darkness of the principalities and powers.
It’s particularly hard for those who are benefiting from the darkness

and shadows (and that includes a whole lot of us) to hear and see what good news for the poor might mean.

And finally one might take offence at the reign inaugurated by Jesus' actions if one becomes impatient. Even though Jesus did many powerful works there are always more people who need healing, who need their sight and their hearing and their very life restored and the poor are still waiting for some of that good news to take effect.

I must admit that in my own darker moments, I've wanted this reign of Jesus to come more quickly and more thoroughly than I have currently witnessed.

As we wait together especially in Advent for the fullness of this reign, let us try to listen to what else Jesus wants us to hear and see.

After John's disciples go away, Jesus asks the crowds about John the Baptist saying, "What did you go out in the desert to see or look at? A reed shaken in the wind? (This was an allusion to an image on an imperial coin) or Jesus continues, did you go out to see a person with nice clothes? Obvious answer, "You'll find nice clothes in palaces."

These questions are not so subtle digs at King Herod and his complicity with the Roman Empire. One more question, Did you go see a prophet? Yes, and not just any prophet, but the one who was to prepare the way and if you're willing to accept it, he, John, is the Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!

There it is again. See and hear the truth. The real wisdom of what is going on here is revealed or discerned through your hearing and your

seeing. This is the kind of knowledge, again a few verses later that is hidden from the wise and intelligent and revealed to infants. The truth of the reign of God is revealed to those who see and hear and Jesus is the One who opens eyes and ears.

I suspect this way of putting things is not accidental.

What we see and hear does affect how we experience the world around us and Jesus is the One who opens our eyes.

Speaking of seeing in a certain way reminds me a Christmas movie I watched again recently, entitled *Love Actually*. Maybe you've seen it?

The first scene opens in slow motion on people greeting each other at the arrivals gate of Heathrow airport. Music throughout is pleasant sustained chords that change only infrequently implying a sense of anticipation. First, the camera focuses on a young woman with a backpack who weaves her way through the crowd until she finds and embraces with joy a young man.

Second, the camera pans to a mom rushing (still in slow motion of course) to embrace two young children – again the overflowing sense of love and joy is obvious.

Third, two elderly women greet and embrace like old friends or sisters. And then a voice of narration by actor Hugh Grant begins as the scenes at the airport continue to unfold.

Whenever I get gloomy about the state of the world

I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow airport

General opinion is starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed,

but I don't see that.

It seems to me that love is everywhere.

Often it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy,

but its always there;

fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives,

boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends.

When the planes hit the twin towers, as far as I know none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge.

They were all messages of love.

If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually is all around.

And if you know the movie – you know that several endearing and quirky storylines unfold. As the narrator has already suggested the love depicted is not always very dignified, but as the movie unfolds it's hard not to laugh and cry when you discover moments of resonance with what they call in the movie the “agony of love” experienced by the characters. This movie is choosing to see in a certain way of course, (and since I have mentioned it in a sermon I must include a note of caution that it is a movie made for mature audiences as it contains scenes of nudity and course language) but if you choose to see it and find yourself laughing and occasionally tearing up you might also find yourself wondering how you might begin to see where love is or can be. And there are some truly poignant moments in the film that

successfully keep it above the level of fluff. Could it be that crazy little movies like this are one way that Jesus opens eyes?

Moving on from the ridiculous to the sublime (I hope), recently I have also been inspired by Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, released in November entitled *Evangelii Gaudium*, or in English - the Joy of the Gospel.

Dare I as a Mennonite Preacher quote Pope Francis?

Francis is not directly addressing the question of my sermon, "Are You the One for whom we wait?" rather this document presumes that at some time or other you have met the One for whom we wait. In the document he quotes Pope Benedict,

"Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction".^[3]

Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God's love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being."

The Pope also says,

"There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter." [He continues], "I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are

infinitely loved. I understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith slowly revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress: [then he quotes Lamentations] “My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is... But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness... It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam 3:17, 21-23, 26).”

The *Evangelii Gadium* is easily accessible online if you want to read more.

Advent darkness can be one of those times where the Joy of the Good news is hard to see and experience and the waiting for the fullness of the morning light seems interminable. This is when we might find ourselves asking with John, “Are you the One for whom we wait?” And Jesus responds with a command to “go and tell the things that your eyes see and ears hear.”

Whether it’s only “a flickering light of a slowly revived faith, a quiet yet firm trust”

or you actually see love all around.

The Joy of the fullness of God’s salvation awaits us all.

May it be so for you this Christmas.

