

Sunday November 29th, 2020

Advent I

Luke 7:18-23

Series: Christmas for Real People
“Christmas for Disappointed People.”

Well, I must confess that I feel a bit behind the times to be talking about Advent and Christmas today, when the malls, and TV ads have been at it for a few weeks now. In fact, hundreds of children may have already had their pictures done virtually with Santa Clause and we hadn't even lit our first Advent candle until today. Christmas, with all its hype however, still seems to creep up on us, and in some ways still surprise us.

This year is particularly troublesome given all the rules about social gatherings. How many can you actually have over for turkey. This will be a Christmas unlike any before and we are now officially in Advent. We have by now sang our first Christmas Carols, so why like Charlie Brown do I feel so sad about all this? In fact, I must confess that every year as I get older, and go through a Christmas season, there seems to be a pervasive feeling of nostalgia, and waves and waves of sadness commingled with the joy of the season.

Perhaps my feelings are related to the hectic nature of this season; certainly, I am missing all the events we usually have in the church, but it's also a sad time canceling the usual family obligations. I know that part of the sad feelings I, and so many of you experience, has to do with our missing loved ones who have died. It seems odd that I still long for those great family gatherings at my grandparents' home, when my grandparents' house hasn't stood on that street corner for many years.

However, let me suggest that maybe there is a deeper reason for this mixture of joy and sadness, hope and disappointment, that we feel at this time of year. The reason is well illustrated in the text read for us from Luke, but if you read the words of the Christmas carols, we sing, you see it mentioned there as well. Perhaps my most favorite of all Christmas carols is *Joy to the World*.

“Joy to the world the Lord is come.” These words captivate the very heart of our reason for joy in this season, but what is the very next line of the first verse? “Let earth receive her king and every heart prepare him room.” The sad fact is, every heart has not yet prepared him room, and the earth has not yet received its king. Certainly, at least for me, why I feel some of this sadness, is likely a reflection of the sadness and disappointment Jesus must be feeling because of the world's rejection of him.

The hymn continues. “No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.” Tremendous words, and therefore joy but, I don't know about where you live, but where I am, sin and sorrows still seem to grow. And the curse, well it seems to be everywhere. How else do you explain what we see in the news? Just read your local paper.

Christmas awakens both joy and sadness, because our expectations have not yet been fully realized.

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It is with this mixture of sadness and joy that we encounter John the Baptist; a man, who more than most, knew intimately how linked these two emotions are. In many ways, John was a very strange man. He wore weird clothes of camel hair, and ate locusts and wild honey. Locust, by the way are kosher. But in spite of this, John was a man of great integrity and faithful obedience.

Jesus even paid John one of the highest compliments ever uttered when he said, "I say to you, among those born of women, there is none greater than John." John enjoyed two unique privileges. First, he was one of Jesus' cousins. They likely knew each other, and maybe spent time growing up together until John went off into the wilderness.

John also, had the unique privilege of preparing the way for, and announcing the arrival of the Coming One, the Messiah, the Saviour and the Lord. John spent his whole adult life pointing people to this Coming One. "He who is mightier than I is coming, and I am not fit to untie the thong of his sandals" is some of the words John preached. When Jesus finally arrived at the Jordan to be baptized, John said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."

However, a funny thing happened after Jesus was baptized by John. Crowds had been coming out in great numbers to listen to John, but after Jesus came, they abandoned John. John's disciples felt badly for John. But he caught them by surprise by saying, "Now this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase and I must decrease." John gave his whole life to prepare people for the Messiah, and the Messiah came and John was joyful.

Jump ahead a few months, and John's joy seems to have evaporated. John's life had changed dramatically. In his zeal for God's holiness, John challenged the personal morality of King Herod. Herod had taken for himself his brother's wife Herodias, and John confronted this powerful politician on his adultery. Herod had John arrested and thrown into jail.

It was from his jail cell that John sent his anguished message to Jesus. It was a painfully short message, but it went right to the point. "Are you the One who is coming, or should we look for someone else?" Something has gone wrong in John's assessment, and he is asking his cousin, "Are you the real deal or not?" Can you understand John's pain at this moment?

John has given his whole life for Jesus, and now he wonders what has gone wrong. Sitting in that damp, dirty, prison cell, he must have wondered if he had led those thousands of people astray. Why did he feel this way? Well Luke tells us in chapter seven, verse 18, "The disciples of John reported to him about all these things." What things did they report?

Certainly, they reported the: good works, the miracles, and the teaching. They likely mentioned that great crowds that followed Jesus. What then in what they reported disappointed John?

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The report was good news. It wasn't what Jesus was doing necessarily, but what he was not doing that bothered John. Jesus was not fulfilling John's idea of what a Messiah should be doing. Jesus disappointed John on two levels. The first is a theological level. John preached his expectations in Luke 3:16. "As for me, I baptize you with water but he who is mightier than I is coming. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Notice John had two expectations for Jesus, baptism by fire and by the Holy Spirit. The prophets mentioned that the Holy Spirit coming on people will be a sign of the Messiah coming. Joel the prophet mentions that fire will consume all that is impure when the Messiah comes. In John's mind, the Messiah when he comes, will bring massive judgment and purification on the people. Now in John's mind these two things were to happen together and at the moment the Messiah arrived.

That is why John urged the people to be ready. Get ready to avoid the judgment to come. The "axe is already at the root of the tree", he proclaimed. As the carol says, "No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground." There was going to be a great purging of all that was sinful and unholy. What made matters really difficult for John was that the very people who John might believe should be getting burned up, were the same people Jesus ate and drank with.

Jesus was, in John's assessment, fraternizing with the enemy. "Are you the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?" Disappointment comes to us when Jesus doesn't fulfill our expectations. But John's crisis comes not just from a theological question, but also out of his personal situation. Namely, that he is in a dirty, awful, prison cell, placed there by an evil degenerate king.

The prophet of God, the forerunner of the Messiah, is rotting away in a jail cell. Why hadn't Jesus destroyed Herod, and taken him thrown, and let John out of jail. Then to add insult to injury, Jesus spends his time eating with tax collectors and other sinners. Further, it seems Jesus was going to make no effort to free John from prison, or even publicly agree with John's assessment of Herod's sin.

Can you identify with John? John is profoundly disappointed: theologically because Jesus did not fit his ideas of what a Messiah should be, and personally, because he didn't liberate him from jail. I think there is some truth to the idea that underlying all theological controversies of our day, is some deep emotional wound that the controversy is pricking at.

We wrestle with the affirmation that "our God reigns", not because there is no evidence of it, but because our personal histories are not going the way we think they should go if God was reigning. We argue about whether or not God still heals in miraculous ways, not because there is no evidence of such miraculous healings, but because we, or our loved ones, have not been healed this way.

We get uptight with enthusiastic Christians who say, "Jesus can give you abundant joy".

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Not because there is no evidence of abundant joy, but because we don't have that abundant joy. So, like John, we ask out of our disappointment, "Are you the Coming One, or should we look for another?"

Have you ever felt like asking that or a similar question? A loved one dies. You get cancer. You lose your job. Depression lingers for weeks and months. This pandemic never seems to end. Natural catastrophes occur. These are questions that cut to the bone. I admire John. At least John was honest. "Are you the Promised One, or should we look for another?"

We can be grateful, that Jesus responded to John's intense emotional pain. You see Jesus answers John on the theological level, and the personal level. In the presence of John's messengers, Jesus had healed, exorcised demons, granted sight to the blind; all evidence of the Messiah being present. Jesus said, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard."

It wasn't that John didn't know these things were going on, but Jesus uses the words of Isaiah the prophet to communicate to John, "I am the Promised One." Isaiah 35:46 reads, "Say to those with anxious heart, 'Take courage, fear not! Behold your God will come with vengeance. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. The lame will leap like a deer, the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy.'"

Jesus is saying to John, "I am the one, but I am not the end of all things as you think I should be, but rather the beginning of the end." Before the coming judgment arrives, there needs to be reconciliation and a healing of the lost. There needs to be hope to the sinner, and an opportunity for the vilest offender to believe and be saved. This was Jesus' way of dealing with John's theological disappointment, but what about his personal disappointment.

Luke 7:23 reads, "And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over me." In other words, "John I am aware you are disappointed in me, but I am asking you to trust me. Yes, my methods and my timing are not as you hoped. I know what you've been preaching. I agree. I too desire to see all of life rid of sin and pain and death and evil. Hang in there cousin. Trust me. I know what I am doing. Let me be the Messiah my way." It may not be a fully satisfying answer but sometimes it is all we get.

Jesus responds to our cries in unexpected way. But that doesn't mean he isn't the Messiah or our Lord and King. Sometimes to end our disappointment, we need to set aside our expectations, and trust him to be the Messiah in his own way, in our lives. It may seem an unsatisfying answer, but in actual fact it is the only answer that will fill us with hope. Even if Jesus didn't rain down fire on the world yet, that doesn't mean we cannot have wholeness in our lives.

Even if Jesus had freed John from prison that would be no guarantee that John would truly be free.

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The bottom line is this: even if Jesus the Messiah did remove all the: pain, sorrow and sickness; and even if he gave us everything we asked, we would not be fully alive until we belonged to him: hook, line and sinker. “Blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over me.”

“Are you the Coming One, or shall we look for someone else?” John asked the question because he wanted to dictate the terms of Jesus being Messiah. Jesus was moving too slowly for him, and in a direction that he didn’t approve. How much of our disappointment is linked to a similar misguided expectation? One of the healthiest ways to deal with our disappointment at Christmas is face our expectations.

To recognize that the beautiful hope born at Christmas will be on God’s terms; not mine or yours. Christ came to Bethlehem and Christ will come again. It is our hope. We need to remember that Christmas is just the first chapter in an ongoing story of God’s grace and deliverance. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

The light has come and it has indeed pierced the darkness. God’s redemptive work begun in Bethlehem continues in me and in you. Hang in there. He knows your struggles; he knows your needs, and he has a plan. So, trust Jesus and you will live.