

Seeing Is Believing
December 15, 2013

Matthew 11:2-11

A pastor tells the following story: " I served a rural Indiana church as a student. In reading the minutes of the church council some years ago, I came across the following:

Elder Smith recommends we hire Mr. Johnson as our student minister. He has a background in music and a history of outstanding youth work. Music and youth are two areas of church life where we need improvement.

Eighteen months later there was another entry: Elder Jones made the motion that we fire Mr. Johnson, our student minister. The man spends too much time working with the kids in the church and it seems all we do is sing during the worship service. We need more preaching and someone to work with the older people."

Mr. Johnson didn't know what to expect from his church council. He tried to please them in one area, and they changed their expectations of him.

John had the same problems with Jesus. John had preached that the Messiah was coming, he told the people to repent, to change their ways, or they would go to hell.

But, then Jesus comes and his preaching is one of compassion, one of love, and John doesn't know what to expect.

SO, he tells his disciples to go to Jesus and ask Jesus if he is the one, if he is the Messiah, if he is the one who is coming, or should we look for another.

John had doubts about who Jesus was. Are you the one?

He wasn't sure Jesus was the one. He wanted to check it out. As he sat in jail, he struggled with what he had heard about Jesus.

He questioned, he had doubts, he wondered.

He might be thinking, "Lord, where did I go wrong? I did what I thought you wanted. I said what I thought you wanted me to say. You told me that Messiah was coming.

But where is he? Where's the fire, the ax, the judgment he's supposed to bring? And why, if he's here, would he let me stay in this place?

I've heard rumors about this one called Jesus. I thought I knew my cousin pretty well. I remember that day in the Jordan when I baptized him. What a glorious day.

I knew it was all beginning then. God's whole plan was being put into play. But, where is he now? Why isn't he doing what I said he would do? Is he really the one or should I look for another?

Wondering, having doubts, is that okay? Do we shy away from these questions of doubts? As Christians do we say doubts, questions of faith are wrong?

We've talked about that a lot in our men's group and some in our Bible study group.

Paul Tillich points out that God does not stand aloof, apart from our questioning; rather God is in the struggle of doubt, making himself known through it. Doubt therefore is a vital part and element of the faith which justifies.

In the book, "A Sign in the Straw" Pastor Richard Hoefler asks, "Who of us have not cried out with John, 'Are you the Christ, or shall we look for another'?"
When life gets tough and we see innocent people suffer; The bad so often succeed while the good fail; When we face a world locked in the death grip of one meaningless war after another;

When we witness the destruction of nature as greed and desire for comforts drain the earth of her natural resources; when we choke on pollution and stumble over wrecked lives of people struck down by drugs and alcoholism; who can help but cry out, 'If you are the Messiah, why this? Must we, shall we, look for another?'

Pastor Hoefler asks again, "When will we learn that faith does not have all the answers? Faith is a risk. Faith is a life of trust, not of certainty and security

God never promised answers to all our questions. God never promised life without stress. He promises and gives only himself, with all the dangers and risks of personal encounters."

Again Hoefler writes, "Our hope? Not faith without doubt, but faith within doubts. Not the answers we possess but who possesses us.

We may doubt God, but God never doubts us. We may not know God but He with absolute certainty knows us. This is the gospel. This is our life. This is the love that will never let us go."

So John had his doubts, he questioned, he wondered, but he did not stay with those doubts, he sought answers. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the one!! If He was the Messiah.

And look at the answer Jesus gives. He says: "Go back to John and tell him what you have heard and seen: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor."

Jesus answers John's question, not with just words, but He tells the disciples what has been done in the name of Jesus. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, etc.

The good news of God has been brought to the earth. Jesus came not merely with the grim news of repentance, but with the good news of the gospel which says you are forgiven, you are to be made whole, you are cleansed.

Frederick Buechner says in his book, *Peculiar Treasures*: "Where John preached grim justice and pictured God as a steely-eyed thresher of grain, Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who cannot bring, himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye.

Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late. Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on wild living like the Prodigal Son, it still wasn't too late.

Where John ate locusts and honey in the wilderness with the church crowd, Jesus ate what he felt like in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find."

Jesus was telling them, "Look around you at the evidence, and decide for yourselves. What does the evidence show? Have the blind received sight?"

What about the blind man Jesus met on the road? Making a paste from the dust in the road Jesus touched his eyes and his vision returned. Ask *him*, "Is he the one?"

And ask the millions of others who have been blind to the truth about themselves and about God, but who've found that Jesus opened their eyes. Ask *them*, "Is he the One?"

Jesus did not fit John's expectations, but Jesus' actions were unmistakable. The world was changing, God's great plan of salvation was unfolding in the world, and John did not understand at first.

I wonder what John thought when his disciples did return with the news about Jesus. Did he now believe with certainty that Jesus was the one? Did he see the gospel of salvation unfolding upon the earth? Could he sense the hope, the life, the salvation that Jesus was bringing to all people? I hope so.

But some people cannot see God's redeeming work in this world. They cannot see the changes that people make.

At a church Bible Study, not ours, but probably similar, someone made this comment: "If God would take one of the town's down-and-outers and change that person over night, it would do more to convince us of his presence than anything I can think of."

And the pastor present remarked, " What about Bob."

Bob had been an alcoholic, hopelessly so, He had drunk himself out of a job, out of a family, out of the town's respect. Then a new preacher was assigned to the Methodist Church in that small town. He and Bob struck up a friendship, and through his influence, Bob started going to A.A. meetings, soon he was sober.

After 3 years, Bob was back at work, back with his family, back in church. The pastor said that when he knew him 10 years later, he was a leader in the community, a lay speaker in his church, and a successful businessman."

God had been working, redeeming in Bob's case, but because it happened over a period of years, people missed it.

But indeed, God dealt with Bob as a whole redeemed person, redeemed his soul, his relationship with his family, his job, and redeemed his relationships with everyone in town."

God is indeed redeeming the world. Sometimes it is right in front of us, but as the old saying goes, we cannot see the forest for the trees.

And I think a big reason for is that we are looking for the wrong things. During his earthly ministry, Jesus needed to establish his authenticity. He needed to get people's attention. He did that with some pretty miraculous and spectacular things.

But he didn't promise that we would continue to find God always in the big things, in the unexplained or the miraculous. Perhaps God does do that sometimes, but all of us can bear witness to the fact that we don't always get what we want.

Yet we continue to look for signs, miracles, big events. We want God to be our Santa Claus. If our prayers aren't answered exactly as we want, we might question whether God is even interested and involved.

But God IS at work. In God's ways, which are not always ours. You've heard the old expressions, stop and smell the roses, or slow down and listen to the music. We need to become more aware of just how God is at work in the world.

We must stop look, feel and experience God's redeeming work all around us.

And sometimes, God uses us to do that work. Sometimes He uses us in the most unassuming way. In the mere presence, the touch of a hand God, uses us to redeem people and situations.

The story goes that Roaring Camp was supposed to be the meanest, toughest mining town in all of the West. It was reported that there were more murders and thefts than any other place around.

It was a terrible place inhabited entirely by men, except for one woman who made her living in the only way she knew how. Her name was Cherokee Sal.

She became pregnant by who knows who and died while giving birth to a baby. The men took the baby and put her in a box with some old rags under her. Somehow that just didn't seem right, so one of the men rode eighty miles to buy a rosewood cradle.

He brought it back, and they put the rags and the baby in the beautiful new rosewood cradle. But the rags didn't look very nice in the beautiful new cradle, so they had another man ride to Sacramento where he bought some beautiful silk and lace blankets.

Now they put the baby in the cradle lined with silk and put the new blanket over her. It looked fine until someone happened to notice that the floor was so filthy.

So these hardened, tough men got down on their hands and knees, and with their calloused hands scrubbed the floor until it was spotless.

Of course, now the walls and the ceiling and the dirty windows without curtains looked absolutely terrible. So they washed down the walls and the ceiling, and they put curtains at the windows.

Things were beginning to look a lot better. But of course, they had to give up a lot of their fighting, because the baby slept a lot, and babies can't sleep during a brawl. So the whole temperature of Roaring Camp seemed to go down.

They would take the baby out and set her by the entrance to the mine in her rosewood cradle, with one of the men staying next to her, so the others could see her when they came out of the mine.

Then somebody noticed what a dirty place the mine entrance was, so they planted flowers, and they made a garden there. It really looked quite beautiful.

The men would bring her shiny little stones that they would find in the mine. But when they would put their hands down next to hers, their hands looked so dirty.

Pretty soon the general store was all sold out of soap and shaving gear. The baby was changing everything.

That's also the way it is for those who have placed their faith in the babe of Bethlehem. The baby enters into their lives, and he slips into every crevice of their experience.

The one who John was wondering about, Jesus the Christ child born in a manger came and changed everything about life. He came into every part of life and changed it.

What child is this, we ask again? It is this child of change - the child that comes now in our lives and changes us from the inside out. He comes with love to forgive, to love, to change us.

Let that child of change enter your life this Advent and Christmas season. Be changed from the inside out.