

Sermon by Leonard VanderZee: “Disappointed with Jesus” from Isaiah 35 and Matthew 11

Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? That’s one of the most haunting questions in the whole Bible. And look who’s asking it. John the Baptist, that tough, seasoned prophet who preached repentance. John the Baptist who stood up to the Pharisees and Sadducees out there in the hot sun, who declared Jesus the Messiah whose sandals he was unworthy to carry, who waded waist deep in water and baptized Jesus as he heard the voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son.”

Certainly John, of all people, would have it together. So what happened? What made him question the identity of the one man who he had been waiting for all his life?

Well, prison for one thing. John was in jail. There’s nothing like getting locked up in the cooler to turn down the heat of your enthusiasm. Fearless in his righteous indignation, he was locked up for attacking the political establishment in the name of the Kingdom of God. We find out later (chapter 14) that John had openly criticized King Herod for marrying his brother’s wife. It will not be long before his guards are sharpening their swords when Herod’s lovely new stepdaughter asks for John’s head on a platter.

“Are you the one...?” John knew a Messiah when he saw one. The Messiah was supposed to revamp the political and religious landscape. In last week’s reading he had outlined the Messiah’s campaign theme. God’s wrath is coming. “The ax is laid at the root of the tree; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.... His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, and will gather his wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” That’s the kind of Messiah John envisioned. He burns up human trash and cuts down the religious deadwood. He separates the good guys from the bad guys once and for all. Hey, let’s get this country back to God.

But Jesus’ doesn’t quite cut the figure of a Messiah for John. The Messiah was supposed to come out all fire and brimstone, but he seemed to come out more for peace, love, and reconciliation. Jesus ministry consists in going around healing people here and there, mostly in the backwater towns of Galilee. He seems to spend lots of time with misfits and spiritual losers, wining and dining with sinners, but too little time chopping down the rotten wood that John has singled out for fiery destruction. Nothing seems to really change. The Pharisees still control the popular piety. The Sadducees still have a lock on the temple. But Jesus is out do-gooding in the hills of Galilee. And to top it off, Herod, the very embodiment of all that is wrong in Israel, is on the throne, and John is in jail. It’s time for some Messiahship here.

It’s all a big disappointment for John. He begins to doubt whether he had it right after all. Maybe God had someone else in mind for Messiah. This is John’s Calvary, his moment when that sinking feeling of abandonment, the fear of having made a terrible mistake creeps into his mind. And he might have to pay for it with his life. His question isn’t academic; it’s squeezed from his gut “Are you the one, or should we wait for another?”

It's a tough question, but we can all be glad that this question, so full of heartbreak and doubt, is found on the pages of scripture. And it's asked by the one who Jesus called the greatest prophet yet.

At some point in our lives, if we are serious about being Christians, we might find ourselves with a similar question. "Is Jesus the one?" Is it all right to ask a question like that? Doesn't it betray a lack of confidence, a failure of faith? No! Jesus did not object to the question, he answered it. John was right to ask. When we run away from our doubts and questions, or hide them under a guise of religious hyperactivity, they will likely grow rather than diminish. Then, like unpaid bills, the interest compounds. Our doubts grow into disinterest, or full-blown unbelief.

At some time or another we have all been disappointed by a Messiah who didn't live up to our expectations. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "You want the Messiah to come and you want him to come *right now*. You want clear helpful answers to your questions. You want to be relieved of the burden of waking up every day without knowing what you're supposed to be doing next. You want to put your hand under the pillow and find the answer there like a quarter from the tooth fairy, but morning after morning all you feel is the sheet."

We're a society that only wants solutions, and market savvy Christians oblige with shelves full of books with simple five-step solutions to your problems. Follow the rules, apply the principles and you will achieve a better life. God will give you a happy marriage, faithful, obedient children, a bigger congregation, and even political influence. Well-intentioned as they may be, they subtly market God as the simple solution to our immediate problems. Instead of seeking what God can do in us and through us, we're after what He can do for us. Instead of Christ transforming our lives, we settle for his making them comfortable.

Is that the way it works? This is a story of a man who is disillusioned with Jesus just like we are sometimes--with Jesus or with God, or with the church, or with the whole Christian faith. But, you know something? That may not be so bad as it seems. Disillusionment is literally to have our illusions "dissed," destroyed. It's very painful, but it's not a bad thing. Disillusionment can be a gift.

When we are disillusioned we have discovered that God does not always conform to our expectations. We look at our requirements for God and begin to see our own selfish illusions--the kinds of things we tell ourselves to feel good or comfortable, or to make sense of it all. But when God wipes away our illusions, we are free to discover the real God.

Taylor says, "Every letdown becomes a lesson and a lure. Did God fail to come when I rubbed the lantern? Then perhaps God is not a genie? Who then is God? Did God fail to punish my enemies? Then perhaps God is not a cop. Who, then, is God? Did God fail to make everything run smoothly? Then, perhaps God is not a [cosmic] mechanic. Who, then, is God?"

When God does not meet my expectations I am drawn deeper and deeper into the mystery of who God really is and what God is really doing in my life and in the world. That's why, surveying the strange ways of God's Son born in a stable and nailed to a cross, Paul says, "the

foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (I Cor. 1: 25)

John voices his deepest doubts, and Jesus answers them. First, Jesus describes what he is doing and saying. He says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them." Now for John, the last and greatest prophet of the old covenant, these words must have had a familiar ring. This is not a direct quotation of any one passage. It's a composite of several messianic prophecies from Isaiah, especially the one we read today, Isaiah 35. In a kind of code language that would be very familiar to someone like John who was steeped in scripture, Jesus is saying: "This is it John; the messianic age, the Kingdom of God, has broken into our time and you can see it from what I am doing and saying. The signs are there for anyone like you, who knows them so well".

How could John misunderstand? There's not a word Jesus says that's untrue. But what John recognizes, and we might recognize too if we study these Old Testament prophecies, is that Jesus leaves some very important words out of this quotation. In Isaiah 35, for example, it says, "Here is your God. He will come with vengeance and with terrible recompense...." That's the kind of language that galvanized John.

You see what Jesus is doing? He is pointing out what John, as well as his own disciples, found hard to understand. Jesus is giving a lesson in prophetic fulfillment. The Day of the Lord does not fully arrive with coming of the Messiah, as they all expected. The day of mercy has come, the day of healing, the day of preaching the grace of God's favor. Still to come is the Day of Judgment, the day of vengeance, when all wrongs will be righted, and God's justice will triumph. Still to come is the day when the groaning creation will be renewed.

The Messiah comes first in apparent weakness to save sinners, to show God's grace to the lowly and afflicted. It is only later, when he returns in glory, that all things will be made right, and creation will be made new. John wants it all to happen now, but God in mercy withholds judgment. No wonder John is disappointed. He didn't realize how God would fulfill his promises in his own time and in his own way.

And that's why Jesus ends his reply to John with a message tailor-made for him, and for all of us who are tempted to wonder sometimes whether Jesus is really the one. "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense in me."

Don't misunderstand these words of Jesus. They are not meant to jab John's tender conscience, or to reprimand his doubts. No, Jesus' answer to John addresses him where he is. Jesus says, in effect "God bless you, John, if you don't throw the whole thing away because I'm different than you expected."

"Blessed are those who take no offense at me." The Greek word means trip over, stumble over. You see the trouble is that John was stumbling over God's unexpected ways. Nothing important really seemed to be changing. Even worse, the whole thing seems headed for certain defeat. Perhaps John already senses his own impending death, and maybe he's wondering whether the same might happen to Jesus.

Jesus knows all about it. That's what that enigmatic statement at the end of our reading means. He says, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the Kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force." (vs. 12) In this very gospel, Jesus has already made clear that the way of the God's Kingdom is non-violence. "Blessed are the peacemakers." "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matt. 5: 9, 38, 44) That's the way of the Kingdom. But the world lives by violence, and by violence it will always seek to destroy God's Kingdom. That's what will happen to John, and to Jesus, and to most of Jesus' disciples. But here is the secret of God's wisdom and power. It's precisely by enduring and absorbing the world's violence that God's Kingdom will triumph. That's the deep meaning of Jesus' cross and resurrection.

Sometimes, like John, we wonder if Jesus is the one. We thought maybe he'd make our lives easy, but he calls us to live more deeply. We thought he'd erase our suffering, but we discovered him next to us in our pain. We thought he'd put us on top, but he tells us to identify with those on the bottom. We thought he'd make us strong, but he calls us to learn strength through our weakness. We thought he'd destroy our enemies, but he asks us to love them. We thought he'd make us leaders, but he invites us to be servants. We expected him in the spectacular, but the signs of his Kingdom come through our ordinary, hidden acts of love and self-sacrifice. We thought he'd come back soon and take us home, but he waits, and sends us to reach the nations first with his gospel of grace. He's not quite what we expected, but "blessed are they who take no offense at him".

Advent comes again into the winter of our lives with that warm breeze of hope. It's the hope kindled by Isaiah's vision of the blossoming desert and the Holy Way over which "all the ransomed of the Lord will come home to Zion with singing, and with everlasting joy on their heads, and sorrow and sighing will flee away".

But that sure hope still glimmers out there on the horizon like the first golden streaks of dawn. So, Isaiah encourages us "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear!' Your God will come.... he will come to save you." (Isaiah 35:3,4). So, once more we are make our yearly pilgrimage to Bethlehem. We peer into that most unlikely place, a stable, to see the baby wrapped in rags and lying in a manger. And we say, "Here is our God, Emmanuel."