

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
December 12, 2010
Matthew 11:2-11

“Doubting John”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Our Scripture reading for today, from the Gospel of Matthew, contains a secret. Actually I think Jesus is speaking to John the Baptist in coded language. And I think what Jesus is saying and not saying—especially what he is NOT saying—is important. In fact, very important.

Let’s look closely at what is happening in this passage and then get to the secret. This is, like last Sunday, a story about John the Baptist and Jesus. Last Sunday, the Scripture reading focused on John’s words about Jesus, *I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.*

We talked about how John, an important figure in the ancient world himself, pointed toward Jesus, prepared for Jesus’ arrival—essentially saying I am the prelude, the opening act, the main act is let to come. John was busy baptizing people in the river Jordan and yet he continually gestured toward Jesus. Anticipating Jesus’ arrival, John, a faithful Jew, quoted the Torah and the words of the prophet Isaiah saying

*This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said
The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*

John is waiting for Jesus, preparing for Jesus, expecting Jesus and gesturing toward Jesus. Then Jesus arrives and comes to the Jordan to be baptized by John and John believes he is not worthy to carry Jesus’ sandals.

That is all in Matthew, Chapter 3—the message is wait, prepare, watch, and look he is here!

Now today our Scripture reading is from Matthew Chapter 11. And what has happened in Jesus' life and ministry between Chapter 3 and Chapter 11 is very significant.

In Chapter 4, we learn that Jesus was led into the wilderness where he fasts forty days and nights and is tempted by the devil. And then he calls his disciples.

In Chapter 5, Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount including the Beatitudes.... Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers...and so on.

In Chapter 6, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer.

In Chapter 7, Jesus tells the parable about the tree and fruit and he preaches about hearers and doers.

In Chapter 8, Jesus cleanses a leper, heals a Centurion's servant, heals many at Peter's house, heals the Gadarene demoniacs, and stills a storm.

In Chapter 9, Jesus heals a paralytic, restores to life a girl who was dead, heals two blind men, heals a man who is mute, and heals the woman with the hemorrhage.

In Chapter 10, Jesus empowers his disciples to heal in his name.

Then, after all these signs and wonders, we come to Chapter 11 and find that John the Baptist is in prison. While in prison, John sends a message to Jesus...listen:

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, Are you the one who is to come, Or are we to wait for another?

John is having doubts. John, who had been saying: prepare the way of the Lord—the one is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire! John, Jesus' cousin, Jesus' #1 cheerleader, support and probably Jesus' closest friend, JOHN sends a message saying, are you really the one, or should we be waiting for another?

John may be doubting because he is in prison and he may be thinking, if you are the Messiah, get me out of here. So John sends a message of doubt to Jesus.

Now remember, these are two faithful and devout Jewish men—they know their Torah. John quoted Isaiah when he proclaimed Jesus was coming and NOW Jesus quotes Isaiah when he responds to John’s message from prison. Jesus says LOOK what I have done and then he lists just what Isaiah predicted the Messiah would do. He is saying: Yes John I am the one.

Listen to Jesus’ answer to John’s message of doubt...

*Jesus answered them,
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 good news brought to them.
And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*

HERE is where the secret is revealed. Jesus is actually talking in code. He is sending John a coded message. He is telling John, Yes, I am the one you have been waiting for...look at all I have done, just what Isaiah predicted the Messiah would do. I have fulfilled the prophet Isaiah’s words. I have healed the blind, the lame, the lepers, and the deaf, I have raised the dead and preached good news to the poor.

Just as John quoted Isaiah when he announced that Jesus was coming, Jesus quotes Isaiah when he responds to John’s question from prison.

YES it is me you have been waiting for.

BUT—and this is the key part of the coded message—Jesus quotes Isaiah to his good Jewish cousin who knows the Scriptural passage by heart BUT Jesus leaves out the part in Isaiah about releasing captives from prison. Jesus quotes Isaiah carefully omitting the part about releasing the captives from prison. John is in prison and Jesus is signaling to him: that is where you will remain and where you will die. And that IS where John dies.

The Book of Isaiah proclaims that the Messiah will do all the things that Jesus in fact does however it also says the Messiah will proclaim liberty to the captives...

Listen to Isaiah 61: 1

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners.*

John would have received Jesus' message, known what was missing—that Jesus does not say I have and I will bring “liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...” John would have heard in essence, YES John, I am the Messiah. And NO John, you will not get out of prison alive. In fact, John is beheaded in prison. Jesus has a hard message for John: yes, I am the one. No, you will not be released.

And why is this so?

Jesus knows that in the process of creating the kingdom of God on Earth, some prophets and leaders will pay with their lives. Jesus knows that he and John and other early followers will be persecuted and killed because of the Jesus Movement. Jesus' vision, his program and his movement are too radical. The changes he proposes in the religious, social, political and economic spheres of life are too revolutionary. Jesus knows that those associated with him will be persecuted.

He speaks to this very point in the Sermon on the Mount. Notice who he blesses in Matthew 5:11

*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great I heaven.*

And so when John in prison begins to doubt if Jesus is the Messiah Jesus sends back a thinly veiled message that says Yes John, I am the one. And no John, I cannot release you. And notice how Jesus ends his message to John...listen to the final words: *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 good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*

No offense at me?

Here I am listing, as predicted by Isaiah, all the remarkable things I have done... healing many, restoring the dead to life, preaching the good news... amazing life-giving signs and wonders. And yet Jesus says to John: blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.

Do not be offended John he is saying. I am the one you have been waiting for but we are turning the world upside down. We are threatening the status quo, we are proposing RADICAL changes, and we are encouraging a revolutionary way of living and thinking and along the way people will be persecuted in my name. I cannot get you out. And you must not take offense at these words. I am the one and even I cannot get you out.

Maybe Jesus is saying: I am the one and we will both be martyred for this movement.

Maybe Jesus is saying: I am the one and blessed are you and all who do not curse me and take offense at the radical nature of my movement.

This passage, this story, matters to us today because it can propel US to be more courageous in living our own faith. John was imprisoned and killed for his beliefs. But no such fate awaits us. We live in a predominately Christian nation where it is expected and accepted that people will be Christians. We live in a time and a place where Christians are privileged, not persecuted.

We can be Christians and get out alive.

We are secure in a country where Christians are favored and safe.

And so I believe we are called, as safe and secure Christians, to live our faith fully. To be bold in enacting our faith, to recognize how radical, revolutionary, egalitarian, inclusive and brave the Jesus Movement was in its time and still is today. We are called to make our words and our actions reflect the deepest values upon which the Jesus Movement was built.

The tenets of the Jesus Movement, not the doctrine of the Church developed after Jesus died, but the tenets of the original Jesus Movement—the values and the principles that Jesus expressed, lived and modeled—include: generosity and care of the poor, hospitality and love of those on the margins of power, equality between and among all God's people, nonviolence, justice, compassion, and comfort for those who struggle, suffer and mourn, and an end to exploitation.

We will not be martyred for living these values. We may be ostracized and told we are not good Christians because we are too inclusive, too radical, too identified with those who are marginalized. But we will not be killed.

And so we must hear John's message and say: YES Jesus is the one John was waiting for. Jesus is the one we all have been waiting for.

And yes, in ancient times and in parts of the world still today people were and are persecuted for their Christian beliefs and practices.

BUT we live in 2010 in this country...with all its strengths and flaws...and we have the LUXURY of being free to live the true, radical, revolutionary spirit upon which our faith is based.

We are safe and secure as Christians and must therefore live the true message of Jesus. We must be bold, clear and strong giving voice to the beliefs, values and principles of the Jesus Movement.

We must be witnesses to his vision, his words and his work.

We must use our safe and secure standing in this society in this time to be visible witnesses to Jesus' message. We must live the values that undergird our faith as preached and modeled by Jesus.

As Christians in this society we are safe and we can afford to be uncomfortable as we choose over and over again to stand up for justice and inclusion, fairness and peace.

Let us take strength from our brave foremothers and forefathers in the Jesus Movement.

Let us be bold and clear in our time. Let us live the message and values passed down from Jesus to the generations that followed and on down to our own.

Let us be living witnesses to the Jesus Movement and model our lives after Jesus' own life—let us remember how he lived, what he preached, and why he died.

Let us not be afraid to do our part and preach the Gospel not just with our words but with our lives.

As Jesus followers today in a time when his message and his vision are so desperately needed, let us go forward with courage, with clarity and with hope. Amen.