
Face(s) of Christ
Chapel in the Park United Church
December 10, 2023
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 11:2-11

Well - is anyone else surprised by our gospel reading today? In the story, John the Baptizer has been arrested. And from jail he sends some of his disciples to find out if Jesus is in fact the long-awaited messiah. Or, if the Jewish people should be waiting for someone else. And that leaves me a bit confused. Because Matthew's version of Jesus's baptism should have made that clear.

According to Matthew, right after Jesus's baptism, while Jesus is rising out of the water, “the heavens were opened and the spirit of God descended like a dove, lighting on Jesus, and a voice from heaven said, 'this is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased'.” And yet 8 chapters later, John the Baptizer is questioning whether or not Jesus is the messiah. It's a bit strange. At the very least, it is unexpected. And it is perhaps an important question for us too. I mean, if John the Baptizer wasn't sure who Jesus was, what does that say about our own ability to figure this out.

Many people have wondered about this of course. Was it simply that John wanted his disciples to connect with Jesus? Was John just stressed out in prison and needed reassurance? Was John just out of touch with Jesus, and didn't know what Jesus had been up to recently? Or perhaps John was just bored. I met many inmates in prison that made up any old excuse to get a visitor, which I understand completely.

Or was it something more serious? More important? Was Jesus's ministry heading along lines that John had not expected? Many Jewish people in Jesus's day expected a messiah that would come in military force and wipe out the Romans, create political changes, fulfill the dream of creating a homeland for Jewish people, and create a global government under God. Perhaps John expected a messiah who would do all of those things. And certainly, if that was John's expectation, Jesus was not exactly following the script. Had Jesus acted in ways that were not what the messiah was expected to act like?

Jesus never called for political change. Jesus never confronted the powers of

Rome. Jesus spent his time ... well, what do you think? What did Jesus actually do during his public ministry?

Ask!

If you have a bit of time in the week, I encourage you to pick one of the gospels and just read through the whole thing. And simply make a list of the verbs, the actions, that Jesus performs. Instead of asking as the bumper sticker says - "What would Jesus do" ask, "What did Jesus actually do".

I once did that activity with a confirmation class. We read the gospel of Mark - 1 chapter for each confirmand. And in the end, we had a list of what Jesus did in that gospel. And in brief, Jesus spent his time speaking with individual people or small groups, teaching, and healing. Much of the time Jesus seems to just hang out with people. Jesus did very little - other than overturning the tables in the temple - that we would consider political in nature. Jesus did not form or lead a political party. Jesus did not form an army. Jesus did not start a new religion. Jesus did not even start a food bank.

If John expected a political or a military messiah, I imagine that he was disappointed by Jesus. But there are other visions of a messiah. Isaiah chapter 42 speaks of a coming servant who will come peacefully. Who will not break a bruised reed. Who will open eyes that are blind. Who will bring out prisoners from the dungeon, those who sit in darkness. But the image of a powerful messiah was certainly a more popular image in Jesus's day than the image of a meek messiah. Perhaps that's still true today.

Perhaps John's question was not whether or not Jesus fit the bill of the messiah. It might have been a question of which type of messiah?

Now even though I have just voiced a whole bunch of questions I think that in this case, the truth is actually pretty simple. We just need 1 piece of information we don't find in the Bible. We often speak of the ministry and the disciples that Jesus had. But before that, John had his own ministry which focused on baptism. John baptized Jesus after all. Well, that part is in the Bible of course. But what is not clear in the Bible is that by the time that Jesus went to John, John already had his own disciples. What is not in the Bible but helps us make sense of all this is that it is very likely that when Jesus went to John to be baptized, Jesus initially became one of John's disciples. In the early days, John was the

leader and Jesus was his follower. And over time, Jesus became recognized as a spiritual leader within John's group. Over time, Jesus became a trusted member of John's group. And then when John was arrested, Jesus took over the leadership of the group that had originally been John's. And Jesus started taking that group in a new direction. So in our reading today, perhaps John was just very keen to know in what direction Jesus was now taking the group that John himself had started.

In any case, the text does not tell us how John reacted to the news he was given, and so we are left to wonder. How did John react to the news that Jesus is working so that the blind receive their sight. That the lame walk. That lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them? Was John surprised? Was John impressed? Was John disappointed? I'd like to believe that John was very pleased. I'd like to believe that John felt his work to advertise the coming of Jesus had been worthwhile.

Today, that question still rings in our ears.

What do we think when we reflect on the life of Jesus? Are we surprised? Are we impressed? Are we disappointed? Frankly, for us - as for John - it depends on what type of saviour we are looking for. Or to be more blunt, it depends on what we expect to get out of Advent this year. What are you hoping to find this Advent?

I would like to quote from Michaela Bruzzese. "Many of us have entered this Advent as we have entered others: Unintentionally. Like any other yearly celebration, it risks becoming tame, predictable, or mindless. Today, in this [second] week of Advent, John and Jesus ask more of us. They ask us to come to the wilderness not to enjoy the scenery or to look at 'a reed shaken by the wind' (Matthew 11:7), but to prepare to meet our Creator and Redeemer. Jesus also emphasizes that John the Baptist, as a true prophet, calls us to the wilderness - literally a wild, untamed place - so that we can meet God on God's terms. Unlike those from the centres of religious and social authority, 'who wear soft robes' and 'are in royal palaces' (Matthew 11:8), John summons us from the margins. He knows that to truly be prepared for Jesus, we must leave our comfort zones and meet God on God's territory. We must go beyond the easy answers and comfortable religion that neither influences nor interferes with the rest of our lives. It is no coincidence that

God chose to be born as an infant for, like new parents, we must be willing to surrender all that is predictable and controllable in our lives to a love we can neither name nor comprehend before experiencing it firsthand. This messiah is ready to teach us to see again, to rise from the dead, to preach the good news, if only we are willing to come to the wilderness and risk meeting God anew.”

I have always thought that one of the best Advent movies of all time is ... The Wizard of Oz. OK, perhaps that’s pushing it a bit. But perhaps not.

In the Wizard of Oz, a young girl named Dorothy is taken to a strange land and then goes on a quest to find her way back home. Along the way she meets 3 characters - a lion, a tin man, and a scarecrow. Each of them is also on their own quest. The lion wants to find courage. The tin man wants to find a heart, and the scarecrow wants to find a brain. And so together, the little ragtag band goes in search of the Wizard of Oz.

The Wizard of Oz turns out to be a lost person themselves. But the Wizard points out that the lion already has courage (he just needed a plaque to realize it). The tin man already had a heart, and the scarecrow already had a brain. And Glinda the good points out to Dorothy that she always had the power to go home. She just had to realize it.

So how does that relate to Advent?

Dorothy is told that she needs to go on a journey, just as we are during Advent. And along the way, Dorothy meets new people and finds forks in the road that are confusing. Just like for us. But Dorothy keeps going, and in the end discovers that the grace and love she is looking for were always present to her. She just did not recognize them. It was only through the journey itself, and her engagement with the people she met along the way that she was able to discover that what she needed for her own peace of mind was already inside her. Dorothy just needed to see with new eyes.

In one sense, Dorothy already had everything that she needed. But in another sense, she did not. Dorothy needed other people, new friends she met along her journey that helped her reflect on her own life. Dorothy may have had what she already needed at the start of the story, but she didn’t know that until she lived out the story and engaged with other people. Among other things, she had to open herself to the wilderness.

Dorothy always had love, but through her journey, she was able to really put faces to that love. At that level, Dorothy's story is our own story. At that level, Dorothy's story is the story of Advent.

Today, during Advent, as we wait for the coming of Christ, I suppose I can tell you the big secret, which is that the Christ is already here. The journey of waiting that we call Advent is an important one, but you and I know that Christ is already present. However, just like for Dorothy we all need the journey of Advent and other people to help us find Christ in our own lives. Sure, a minister can simply declare that "Christ is already here". But that grace will only become real for us as we follow the journey of life and engage with other people. And as we let other people engage with us. Like Dorothy, we need to put a face to Christ.

There is a benediction that ends with, "may you see the face of Christ in everyone you meet, and may everyone you meet see the face of Christ in you." And I like that benediction, because it reminds us to look for the face of Christ in others.

This week I added an image to the bulletin. Do you know what it is? At first glance, I assume that many of you thought it was a tree. And it is. But the tree is made up of faces. I believe there are 10 faces in there, but perhaps there are more than I have found.



For me, in so many ways, this image represents Advent.

Because if you simply glance at the image, you will see a tree. In order to see those faces, you have to slow down a bit, take your time, and look with a lot more intention.

And for me, that is exactly like Advent. If you simply glance at Advent, you will see Christmas trees and other delights. And of course, that can be a lot of fun. But I think the objective of Advent is to see the face of Christ in the people around us. Or better yet,

the many faces of Christ. Take a walk down your own street, into the mall, into the library, and yes, into this church and look for the face of Christ in your midst. Advent is a call to meet God anew, and we can begin that by simply looking for the face of Christ in each other and all around our community.

As our Advent journey continues, look with open eyes and open hearts, and you will see the face of Christ. And reach out to others. Perhaps. Just perhaps you will be the face of Christ to them.

Amen.