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Matthew 11:2-11
Advent 3

STRANGER DANGER

One thing that the season of Advent teaches us beyond all doubt is that in the early church John the Baptist was a big deal — a very big deal. I suspect that at the height of his influence, John preached to bigger crowds than Jesus ever did. Many believed that he was Elijah come back from the dead, since according to one legend, this was supposed to happen before the Messiah came. His dress was wild, his preaching was fiery, and most appealing of all — bad people got what was coming to them.

Now we are confronted with this strange and remarkable question, coming from John after he has been imprisoned by Herod for stepping on the toes of the Empire. The question is sent out by way of his people, and it is as simple as it is unsettling: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Wait a minute. This is the 11th chapter of Matthew, a gospel that begins, as all the gospels do, with John handing off the messianic mantle to Jesus, with voices coming down from heaven, and with John confessing that he should not be the one baptizing Jesus but the other way around — I am not worth to untie his sandals, and all that. So it would appear that this issue is settled. John is the first of Jesus’ contemporaries to recognize him as Israel’s

long-awaited Messiah. Now he wants to know if perhaps he was mistaken?

I have long been fascinated with this text because it is what I call a “landmine” text. It lies on the page unexploded until you step on it and realize that the trip wires have been there all along, just waiting for you to stumble on them and step right in the middle of what they really mean. I think the writer of Matthew’s gospel puts this question on the lips of John because the church itself is having second thoughts about Jesus, just like we all have second thoughts about Jesus – whenever we place our hope in something that we don’t fully understand, and whose results are not what we expect, and whose timeline belongs to God, and not to us.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s talk first about John getting thrown in prison. In case you haven’t noticed, it happens to a lot of famous people who don’t know how to play nice with other famous people. Prison apparently does two things to most people. It makes you wonder what went wrong, since this is not the scenario that most people imagine. And you have a lot of time to think things over, and to doubt all sorts of things you were previously certain about.

It is no accident that Martin Luther King Jr.’s most profound single piece of writing, his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” came while he was actually in the Birmingham jail. He wrote it on the margins of the newspapers that were brought to him to read, because they would not provide him with any writing paper. One of those papers contained an article written by his fellow clergy urging him to back off and slow down, and try to accomplish integration without all these messy marches and protests, and the potential for violence that accompanied them. They even went so far as to suggest that he wasn’t really a Christian because he was creating

situations that could turn violent, and alienating the business community, and therefore working at cross-purposes with a loving God in the name of the Prince of Peace. Mostly, however, they represented the Chamber of Commerce, and riots have a negative effect on shopping.

This infuriated King, and caused him to write his now famous letter in response to their charge that he was an “extremist” and a trouble-maker. He responded that Jesus was also both — an extremist for love, and a trouble-maker for the kingdom. You see, when your friends get on your case, instead of joining you in the cause, it is especially hard to take. John is the first to recognize Jesus, baptizes him, and then steps off the biggest religious stage of the day only to end up behind bars.

There is apparently nothing like prison to sharpen the mind. What else is there to do, but to wonder if you are doing the right thing? To wonder if you are the one who is deluded? Dietrich Bonhoeffer sat in prison on charges that he had conspired to kill Hitler, and wrote a poem just a few weeks before they came and took him out of that cell and hanged him. It is full of self-doubt, and in it he asks, “Who Am I?” (which is the title of the poem). In it, Bonhoeffer, wondering if he is a weakling or just a hypocrite, whether he has peace of mind, or whether he just doesn’t care anymore. Prison does strange things to the mind.

John the Baptist is no exception, sitting in the darkness of his cell, a stark reminder that preaching has consequences if you afflict the comfortable instead of just comforting the afflicted. And in those days, prison was not a final destination, as it is for so many so prisoners today, or a place where you go after you were sentenced to a certain time period – rather in those days it was a way station, a

holding tank. People were kept in prison in those days awaiting trial until they were exonerated, exiled, or executed.

But during their incarceration, prisoners could have contact with supporters and so they picked up the news of the day. It is possible that John was even imprisoned with some of his contemporaries in this Repentance Movement, and some lines of communication in an out of prison remained open this way. It was not solitary confinement.

Of course, none of this matters to the writer of Matthew's gospel. He is interested in establishing the true identity of Jesus. But what is fascinating to consider is why he thought he needed to do this at all — writing decades after the death and resurrection that created this Jesus Movement. Why are people still asking this question? Why are we still asking it? “Are you the one, or shall we look for another?”

Well look around. Does this look like the messianic age to you? I mean, it may be beginning to look a lot like Christmas, but does it look anything at all like the Reign of God to you? Does it look like ‘Peace on Earth’ to you? Does it appear that God has set up his household and now is the Householder of justice and mercy, where everyone in the human family has enough, and no one is left out? Preachers, of all people, ought to be able to relate to this question and not brush it aside: “Are you the one . . . or shall we look for another?” I mean, if this is what the messianic age is supposed to look like, then maybe we don't really know what a messiah is supposed to look like?

Or, and this is perhaps the most dangerous idea of all: maybe we don't know what a messiah is supposed to do. Because when Jesus answers the question, he doesn't identify himself. He points

to what is happening now that he has come. He doesn't do theology the way we do it in the church today. We do what I call "Identity Theology." We make certain that we know who the good guys are and who the bad guys are, and that we believe all the right things so we can all get the right rewards.

But Jesus doesn't tell John to just have more faith, which really means to be more certain about what he believes – he says, Look at what is happening. Look at what has changed. Look with your own eyes and you will see that 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."

What is interesting here is that the list is not at all unusual from a Jewish prophet. He is in many ways echoing the dream of Isaiah when the wounds of creation would be healed. Matthew is just picking up on the familiar list. The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised in Isaiah's dream. Oddly, however, there is no parallel in Isaiah to the lepers being cleansed — which may be an important way that Jesus is breaking with the purity codes of the past.

But what is even more fascinating is that Isaiah does not include in his list of things that will happen when the reign of God comes, the last line attributed to Jesus: "the poor have good news brought to them." The Greek word for poor here is *ptochoi*, and refers to the destitute, the down and out, the desperate. So we have something very different happening in this text as it compares to Isaiah's dream. First of all, Isaiah imagines a new world in which there is healing and hope, but he does not link it to the coming of a messiah. In fact, there appear to be no distinctive documents that specifically depicted the messiah fulfilling these roles; so Jesus

either breaks the mold (if there is one) or introduced a new twist on the conversations of the day.

And to conclude his list of things that will happen when the reign of God begins, is that the poor will have good news brought to them. Their wounds will be healed by a true healer, not by a phony physician. Jeremiah said once, “They have treated the wounds of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”

Phony healers — this makes me think, oddly enough, of the political theater we have all been witness to this week. The extension of tax cuts for millionaires and billionaires at a time of both record deficits and growing poverty — forced on a president who says he opposes them but has no choice if the economy is to recover, and the unemployed are to continue receiving the checks they need to live on. “They have treated the wounds of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”

We are always professing our sympathy for the poor while leaving the systems that create poverty in place. But Jesus knew that the poor are always the ultimate text of the covenant we say we have with God. Everyone is in favor of treating individual poor people with compassion, but it gets much more complicated when the poor are referred to as a group who are the victims of systemic injustice visited upon them by rulers, whether Caesar, Herod, Antipas, John Boehner, or Barack Obama.

Because Jesus has in mind a new program for the poor as a group, which means something must change or there is no reason to call it “good news,” the one we call Lord is at once a political figure, not just a religion one. Indeed, both John and Jesus entered the public arena against well-prepared opponents and spoke truth to power. The proof that they were a political threat is simple to

provide. One ended up in prison and was beheaded; the other was hung on a cross until he suffocated.

Those in power stay in power and exploit the powerless until someone stops them. Not until someone negotiates with them, giving them something they want so that we can have something we want — but until someone stops them. That would require something so new that it could only be called an advent. And it is not for the faint of heart.

Listen to the way Jesus shifts the emphasis in the last half of our texts from himself to John with three powerful images: a reed shaken by the wind, a soft robed courtier, and something more than just a prophet. These images would have struck the ear of a first century person with unique power. Why? Because Herod placed the image of reeds on the coins he minted, and Jesus may be making a sarcastic statement about how he is just a client king blown to and fro by every wind emanating from Rome.

Or perhaps Jesus is referring back to the exodus story and the parting of the Reed Sea (the Red Sea) where the winds held back the waves. Perhaps this powerful symbol of hope to his Jewish listeners is what Jesus is referring to as he looks to a liberated future. And in the final reference to John as more than just a prophet, indeed as someone greater so far than anyone born of a woman and yet compared to the least in the kingdom, is found wanting — this sounds contradictory and convoluted, but the writer of Matthew's gospel is still dealing with the power and popularity of this desert preacher in comparison to the gentle ways of Jesus who came preaching forgiveness of sins and was executed as a common criminal.

Don't you know that people in the early church are still comparing the two. They are the two most common and yet

irreconcilable approaches to religion. For John it was “Watch Out!” and for Jesus it was, “Come on In.” For John it was Turn or Burn, for Jesus it was “Stand up straight.” For John it was about insulting sinners into repentance, for Jesus it was about loving into it. And you know there were people who were still saying, “That John, he stuck it to a king and lost his head. That Jesus, carried his own cross to his own execution and then forgave the people who killed him!”

We still confuse these two approaches to the life of faith and assume that however admirable non-violence is, it is impotent. And yet, as it turns out, governments fear non-violent movements more than they fear violent ones. People with guns know how to deal with other people who have guns. But they don't always know what to do with those who refuse to fight. Just ask the Israelis. They fear the peace movement within their own ranks much more than they fear the Zionists. If Palestine were to launch a non-violent resistance to their occupation, it would reveal the true nature of that conflict in a heartbeat.

Here is where I think the lectionary passage ends too soon. Notice the line that follows the end of this text — it's no wonder we stopped at verse 11. Verse 12 says, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.”

Can you hear what's happening in that line? The young church is being persecuted. Jesus followers are not seeing the immediate results that human beings like to see. Jesus has been dead for a generation and more people still talk about John, who died like a man. Rome is still in charge and breathing down the decks of everyone who dares to say its days are numbered. Tax breaks are still going to those who don't need them as the poor are being

forced off the land, their vineyards repossessed. No wonder Jesus says in one of his beatitudes, “Blessed is anyone who takes offense at me.”

Remember when you were a kid, and your parents told you not to talk to strangers? When our kids were young, we turned it into a catchphrase. Stranger Danger. It was shorthand for the risks that come when you don't know someone and that person might harm you. We do not, however, have a shorthand phrase for the stranger who might help us by putting us at risk. For the one we don't know who means to save us. For the one we wouldn't recognize if he came among us, even though there is no end to our singing about him, praising him, and making up myths about him.

I want to give up the madness at Christmas time so that we can contemplate becoming mad in a different way. My family will buy no presents for anyone in our extended family this Christmas (with the possible exception of Iris), not because we don't want to help the economy but because we find the commercial frenzy and its inevitable indebtedness to be the antithesis of the gospel. We wish to worship with our Muslim sisters and brothers because right now, they are the ones on the run without a place to lay their covered heads. We want to go on doing what 363 did yesterday not because it is easy but because it is right and good, and when we do it the angels sing.

Hallmark did not invent Advent. It would be way outside their comfort zone. Forcing a crèche onto public property will not constitute good news to a single poor person. As for English Only laws, what do you call a person who speak three languages? Tri-lingual. What do you call someone who only speaks one language: An American. Let's not act more like Herod at Christmas time than like Jesus, shall we not? Let's not assume that the danger comes

from south of the border, when in fact the danger really comes from the fact that after all this time we still have to ask: “Are you the one, or shall we look for another?”

Recently I was asked to provide an endorsement for a new book by Brandon Scott on the Resurrection. One of the dust-jacket quotes that make you want to read the book, or generally exaggerate its world-changing significance. And I was happy to do it, but the publisher made what turned out to be a rather interesting mistake. I was identified as Robin Meyers, author of “Saving the Church from Jesus.” That is backwards, of course. My book is called “Saving Jesus from the Church,” but the mistake caused quite a stir — as if in it there may be a hidden message we would all have missed if we had just been more careful.

Maybe the church really does need saving from Jesus. Invested as we are in faith as a belief system, rather than a way of life, and thoroughly unacquainted with the white-hot gospel we permit our children to read, and sing lullabies about. Perhaps it is the church that resists Jesus the most, as in “Stranger Danger.” Are you the one, or shall we look for another?

Now for the rest of the story. I got a call the other night from the man in Phoenix, Arizona who launched the amazingly successful progressive Christian DVD series entitled “Living the Questions.” We use it here at Mayflower and it is used in hundreds of churches across the country. It is a series of short conversations with leading progressive Christian theologians and pastors which are intended to spark further discussion among adult Sunday School participants around issues of faith, justice, and the future of the church.

He said, “Robin, I realize that you aren’t really the author of a book called “Saving the Church from Jesus,” but then, neither am I

the creator of a DVD series entitled, “Questioning the Living.” We laughed. But then he said, “But I can’t get this idea out of my mind — that the church might need saving from Jesus. I said, you mean “stranger danger,” and he said, yes, exactly.

So if it’s alright with you, he continued, I would like to get together a dozen or so of my principle people involved with LTQ and meet at Mayflower sometime next year to launch a new series called “Saving the Church from Jesus.” We can do most of our filming there, and we’ll build on “Saving Jesus from the Church,” but with a kind of dyslexic twist. Could we have a couple of days at Mayflower to scheme and dream and meet your people? They’ve all been saying they want to visit Mayflower anyway, and worship with you.

How long do you think it took me to say yes to this?

Advent.

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Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, December 12, 2010

Lord of Life, we will be tempted this week and next to move too fast. Slow us down. We will be tempted to make a list, check it off, and get more and more stressed as we move toward the manger, toward heavenly calm, toward the poetic memory of the smell of straw and the sounds of animals breathing softly their adoration of a baby

born in obscurity and scandal. We will jab our fingers with the scissors wrapping presents and say bad words about the cost of wrapping paper and why we didn't save more bows from last year, or why we even need to buy so-and-so and present. Did they buy one for us last year? I don't think so. And I don't feel peaceful.

Enter into our restless heart Lord and let us make of Christmas what our souls long for, not what our ego dictates. Let us eat together, talk together, and cherish our children together. Let us read, walk, sing, pray, and watch the sky as it dies in the west — known that spring will come, and the redbuds will blaze again.

But most of all, take us more deeply in the meaning of the birth of Jesus, and what might be different in the world if we listened to him instead of just singing about him. Let us be, not just fans, but followers, not just worshippers, but disciples, not just hangers on, but those who hang out with this strange, sometimes frightening presence. Are you the one, or shall we look for another?

Amen.

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