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December 12th, 2010 Advent 3

Matthew 11:2-11

WHO ARE YOU?

A little while back the History Channel ran a special called "The Face of Jesus" in which they slowly revealed what computer artists depicted Jesus' face to look like based largely on the visage from the controversial "Shroud of Turin", supposedly the burial cloth of Jesus that was wrapped around his face and still bears that image today.

In typical documentary fashion they took an hour to describe about 10 minutes worth of information...it usually goes like this: Jesus Christ. Many people wonder what he looked like. We have art and statues, but we have never had an accurate portrayal - until now. When we return, the face of Jesus. Then you have several commercials about laundry detergent, new cars and what new pill can cure everything from your arthritis to what used to be very personal issues - all you have to do is put up with minor side-effects like nausea, constant dizziness and/or massive headaches...last night I saw an ad for an asthma drug that lists as a side effect an increased risk for serious asthma attacks. What? We're now "curing" asthma by making you more susceptible to asthma? All of our R&D money these days must be going to the marketing department. Anyway, back to Jesus. And we're back! Scientists and really smart people have worked for decades to uncover what you are about to see - the very first glimpse at a computer generated "picture" of Jesus...the very face of the "son of God"...when we return from commercial break.

Eventually, of course, you get to see what they've done - in the last 5 minutes of the program - and you realize that one of the reasons that they delayed so long is that this really isn't that impressive. What I found more interesting is the sort of "audience reaction" that they had to the depiction. Using a Blackberry, they took the picture around New York City and even to the Vatican, where they asked people what they thought of this picture of Jesus. The replies were everything from "That's

exactly my image of Jesus” to “Kinda questionable” to “I don't think that there should be any one face attached to the idea of Jesus”. One woman said, “I see love, I see compassion, I see my savior”, while another couple responded to the question “do you think that you are looking at what he actually looked like” with a strong, “no”. Some younger folks even remarked that Jesus looked hot. By the final response was from a woman who said, “It doesn't matter how he looked, its what he did that counts.”

We have no Polaroid picture of Jesus. We have icons, but the first ones appeared in the 5th century, quite awhile after anyone who had ever seen Jesus in person weren't around for consultation. And those icons largely tell a story, they, like all art, have an agenda. The fact is, we don't know what he actually looked like and perhaps, as the woman said in the documentary, it doesn't really matter. Perhaps what we think about Jesus isn't as important as what Jesus was doing. Contained in the words of the people that the interviewer spoke to is the same question that continues to sit with all of us...believer and non-believer...the same words that John the Baptist spoke...who is Jesus? Is he "the one", or should we look somewhere else?

Matthew's portrayal of John the Baptist is almost heartwrenchingly poignant. This is John – the wild-haired, crazy prophet in the wilderness who announces Jesus as the coming messiah...the fearless, visionary of an end time that brings Jesus with an ax, ready to chop down the fruitless trees. That John now sits in a prison cell. Perhaps he hears what the “messiah” has been doing, but the text really implies that he has no idea. Its not like he had access to the latest AP reports of Jesus' activity. But I think that he sits in his cell and wonders where the revolution is. Where is the triumphal coming of “the one”? Where is at least the sound of the clearing of the threshing floor? So he sends word to Jesus through his own disciples – you know, the ones who follow him, not Jesus – and asks this revealing question: Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? In other words, when are you going to start being the messiah, Jesus? Where is the winnowing fork, where is the fire and the ax swinging away at the trees bearing no fruit? There is no one more fruitless than Herod, but he's still doing his thing while I'm in prison!

I imagine that Jesus' reply does John no good either. Healings and cleansings simply don't compare to the unquenchable fire of judgment. But this is the word that Jesus sends back – tell John what you hear and see...tell him what is happening, not what he thinks should happen. John's problem, judging from Jesus' response, is that he doesn't recognize Jesus' actions as messianic because he hasn't yet been taught to see these things as indicators of God's presence. John, according to Jesus, needs to stretch his imagination of what the presence and power of God look like...that the reign of God doesn't look like a Roman imperial guard only with wings and halos. God's imperial reign doesn't just have the rich and the poor trade places,

it is a much more profound reversal than that. John expects a certain image – and Jesus is not fulfilling it.

How something looks can be pretty important to us. Even in John's days the image carried a lot of weight. One of the primary ways that the Roman Empire propagated itself was through the use of statues, art and coinage that reflected a certain image to the social network. After all, it's the packaging that matters, right? The dominant message in our social network today is best stated by that old SNL skit – the guy Fernando, played by Billy Crystal, who always said...“Well, you know, it is better to look good than to feel good.” Just open the Gazette and look at even half of the ads. The message is that a little tuck here, a little body sculpting there and your life will be perfect and complete. Even in my line of work, looks matter. If I show up to a meeting dressed in jeans and a sportscoat I give a lot different impression than if I am in a suit and tie, and a far different impression if I wear a clerical collar.

Not knowing what someone looks like is a very significant thing to us today. We are a highly visual people and we gain much of our insight from images. Consider the fact that when people voted for George Washington or Thomas Jefferson for President, they quite possibly could have had no idea what they looked like. Can you imagine such a scenario today? Images are the driving force of our culture. So when you see images of Jesus on a white horse descending from the clouds, you have an idea of what he might be about. When you see images of Jesus as a shepherd, you also form ideas based on that visual representation. So, what does it mean that the earliest Christian imagery we have – the very first examples of how the followers of Jesus identified and represented themselves – is not of Jesus at all, but of what is now called the “Orant” – an image of a woman, arms outstretched, praying? I would imagine that this basic image doesn't necessarily evoke God for you, even though it was, at one time, the primary image for the Christian community.

The John paradigm has a messiah that looks like a 5–star general, leading his troops to glorious victory by the hand of a mighty God...Israel returned to Judean rule and freedom celebrated as the political triumph of a blessed rebellion. God swoops in like a raging forest fire and consumes all of the tinder, anything that is dead and flammable. John is looking for a very specific thing and when he doesn't see it, he can't even see Jesus.

The Jesus paradigm is something else. Jesus returns this message via John's disciples: Tell him to stop looking for something else – look at what is happening right now. Tell him that the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side. Tell him that. And then tell him blessed are those who take no offense at me. Tell him that I am the Christ not because of what he expects me to do but because of

what God expects me to do. And what God expects me to do is to be on the side of the marginalized...to show people a new definition of power that comes through sacrifice and service.

John is great, Jesus tells his disciples. John is as great as anyone in history, but in the empire John announces the lowliest person is ahead of him. Even John, who is a prophet on par with Elijah, doesn't get it. He thinks that he was announcing the replacement of Rome's empire with my empire. No...this is something altogether different. This is a new way of determining what is honorable, a new measuring stick for how we interact with one another...completely new hearts! And what you see – the healing and the caring, the compassion and the grace – this is the mark of God's blessing, the sign of God's favor...the sign that we are taught and encouraged to ignore. Those things are too small...an action of God would be flashy and dynamic! Miracles always shine like the July sun!

Who do we think that Jesus is? What are the ways that we think that he lived and the ways that we trust him to be working still? And if we trust that Jesus' birth announces the indwelling of a new kingdom, the arrival of the reign of God, then what might that look like? What if in the midst of our waiting for a kingdom that has supposedly never come we learn that it is already here, we just don't recognize it?

John the Baptist gets Jesus' answer back and we never hear what he does with it, mostly because I think that Matthew intends that answer for us. Jesus answers the “are you the one” question the way he always does – well, what do you think? The peasant woodworker born in the backwoods to a dishonorable Joseph and a shameful Mary comes announcing the reign of God with healing and hope, with grace and generosity – not with the fire that the world surely deserves. Is he the one? And if he is, are we ready for the one to be the guy who keeps turning everything upside down? Are we ready for a miracle that brings down the mighty and raises up the lowly? Are we ready for an indwelling of God that creeps in slowly...a still, small voice that we must attune our ears to...a voice that tells us to change the world by caring for the person next to us? A voice that tells us to bring peace by being peace? A voice that tells us to work for a world which we will never see in our lifetimes, instead of grabbing all of the gusto we can because life is short? Are we ready to accept what seems like foolishness to the world at large as not only holy, but the primary means of God's action in the world?

In the Advent reading you heard earlier is the most familiar of the Christmas tales, but it is only one of them. We tend to mush them together, but in the four gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke & John) we get only two birth stories, and only Luke's has much detail. Let's just take Mary, for instance. In the passage read today, Mary announces the empire of God that is coming. She calls for the reversal of power and authority, she calls for the powerful to come off their thrones and the lowly to be

lifted up, for the hungry to be fed and the rich to go away empty. This is a radical treatise, this speech we call the "Magnificat". It was a dream of foolishness to a pregnant peasant girl in Judea, just as it dreams of a foolish notion today. We know what power looks like – and it always wins out, right?

In 1983 more than 22,000 people were killed by the military junta in Guatemala, people who were for the most part asking for basic human rights. Those were also the heydays of Christian base communities in Latin America. In those communities people fervently studied a revolutionary book. No, it was not Mao's Quotations and it was not Karl Marx's Manifesto. The people in those base communities did something very subversive: they read the Bible! And they read these words of Mary as filled with such power that the government of Guatemala banned the public reading of the words you heard earlier. It makes me wonder – did the government of Guatemala have a better understanding of scripture than we do? Did they understand the power of changing people's vision, of their expectations of what was even possible being transformed by the imagination of faith? Did they understand that believing was seeing? Did they understand the threatening force of an impossible dream?

A professor of mine at seminary once told of an encounter she had with a student during class. This student starting talking to her about how the virgin birth was just too much, too incredible to believe. She responded, "If you think that was incredible, come back next week. Then, we will tell you that 'God has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.' We'll talk about the hungry having enough to eat and the rich being sent away empty. The virgin birth? If you think you have trouble with the Christian faith now, just wait. The virgin birth is only a small miracle, a story to open our imaginations; the really incredible stuff is coming next week."

Now she was not an advocate of literalism. She wasn't someone who believed in a literal virgin birth– in fact, far from it. But she wanted the student to see that the message of that Christmas story wasn't really the suspension of natural law, it was the miracle of God being present among us when that was the least likely thing that anyone could imagine. The real miracle of Christmas is the indwelling of God within our own humanity – flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone...that we, with every breath we take and every thing that we do, live God into the world around us.

David Miller, at the outset of his 2006 book *God at Work*, shares an exercise he regularly uses with groups of congregational leaders. "How many of you," he asks, "install Sunday School teachers at the beginning of a new program year." Almost all the hands go up. "And how many call the youth group and their advisers forward for prayers during worship before they leave for a mission trip." Again, most hands are in the air. "And how many," he continues, "early in April have all the Certified Public

Accounts stand for prayers during the busiest time of their year? How many bless the lives of teachers or sanitation workers or nurses or account analysts?" Typically, no hands remain. Miller's point is that through this and a thousand other ways we unintentionally signal that the primary place our people can expect to see God is at church...and often only at church. But this isn't typically where we live the experience of God. We come here to remind ourselves, to prepare ourselves to see something, to worship and thank the presence of Christ...but the miracles of life are not limited or confined to this place. They reside within us and go wherever we go.

Matthew, through the mouths of Jesus and Mary, would have us see a God that is standing right next to us in the midst of our darkest nights and our most glorious days...a God that is at work in all of the so-called "ordinary" parts of our lives...a God that is so connected to us that our model, our best example of being closest to God is born to us as an infant this Christmas morning...a crying, defenseless, vulnerable infant, born of Mary and Joseph's foolish trust in an impossible dream amidst the chaos of broken social mores, oppressive regimes and the long reach of a Herod with bloody intentions. What if that was where we also looked for God – in foolish reaches for impossible dreams, in small miracles that look for the action of God in even the most tragic and dire of circumstances? What if when we looked for the face of Jesus we saw one another?

The miracle this Christmas is that once again people's hearts are open enough to spend their time cooking food, serving others a meal instead of themselves, knitting scarves, shopping for clothes that they will never wear, teaching children who are not their own, setting aside consumption in the name of communion, looking to be whole instead of being right, setting aside conformity in the name of diversity...doing all of these things and more when everything in the culture around them says that not only is there no reason to do that, but that what they're striving for is a foolish dream that will never happen.

A foolish dream...like the one given to us on a Christmas night in Bethlehem, so long ago.

AMEN.