

## Are you the one? Or should we keep looking?

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.*

*The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, Year A. December 12, 2004. Text: Matthew 11:2-6.*

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” John the Baptist, locked up in Herod’s prison, sent messengers to Jesus to ask him this. *Are you the one? Or should we keep looking?* —Strange questions, coming from John the Baptist.

After all, John was Jesus’ cousin and had baptized him. He’d seen the dove descend upon him. On that occasion John had announced to everyone that Jesus was “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Concerning himself, John said that he was not the Messiah, just the “advance man” for him, the “warm up” before the main act. But now he wasn’t so sure. He was plagued with doubts.

John had always been what folks down South used to call “a screamin’ preacher.” He blistered people’s ears. Everywhere he went, his message was the same: God was about to send his Messiah to punish evildoers and vindicate the righteous. So, sinners needed to get baptized and put their lives right with the Lord or else when Messiah came they’d feel the flames. —We heard a few lines from one of John’s classic sermons last Sunday: *“You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance!”*

In spite of his hell-fire and damnation preaching, John drew big crowds. And he made converts. Lots of people were baptized in preparation for the advent of the Lord’s anointed. John had seen Jesus as the long-expected deliverer of Israel, the One who would purge his people with Spirit and fire and usher in the age of God’s direct rule.

So John, sitting in his prison cell, must have thought (and must have said out loud to his disciples when they visited him), *“If Jesus is the Messiah, what am I doing locked up in Herod’s dungeon? How come he hasn’t called down fire from heaven to burn up Herod and his soldiers and set me free? How come there hasn’t been an earthquake or a whirlwind or something awesome to show what he can do? —Could it be that I was wrong? He’s not doing things the way I expected he would. Maybe Jesus isn’t really the Messiah, after all. Maybe we should keep looking.”*

*Is he the one? Or should we keep looking?* This is something people ask about Jesus today, isn’t it? There are many in America (and elsewhere) who are looking for something, looking for someone who can help them make sense out of life... who can offer a vision for tomorrow that isn’t just “life is hard and then you die,” or “the one who has the most toys wins.” Whether they use this word or not, I’d say most spiritual seekers are looking for *salvation* —an experience of wholeness, fulfillment, and peace that doesn’t vanish when a chemically-induced euphoria wears off, or the money is all spent, or the contests have all been won, or the sensual thrill *du jour* stops being a turn-on.

Since Christianity is the dominant religion in America, most seekers in our country started out as at least nominal Christians. But at some point – maybe when they went to college – they dropped out. Did they do that because Jesus hadn’t fulfilled their private expectations —or was there another reason?

No doubt, some turned away because what they remembered from Sunday School didn’t fit with what they were learning at the university, and nobody seemed interested in trying to answer their adult questions. Some dropped out because what their church offered them or required from them didn’t seem to work; it didn’t fill the emptiness they felt inside. Or – perhaps for some – the simple, black-and-white, binary moral universe described by the local preacher didn’t deal with the gray areas and ambiguities they came across in real life situations. For others, the “mountaintop” experience at an evangelistic service wasn’t followed by what they’d expected. There had been an emotional high, but no enlightenment. Some had prayed for a miracle and when no miracle happened, they turned away. Others couldn’t cope with the mystery of suffering —how terrible things could happen to innocent people.

For whatever other causes (and there are many), what some people experienced in church didn’t bring them what they felt like they needed. I think a major reason is that many times churches are unable to *connect* their people

personally and effectively with Jesus. They can't make the sort of "introduction" that works. Therefore, for some folks brought up as nominal Christians, Jesus always remained a stranger. —So some of them abandoned Christianity and latched on to something else — maybe a form of Buddhism, or Transcendental Meditation, or Scientology, or the occult, or... you name it.

These people at some point asked the question, *Is Jesus the one? Or should I keep looking?* And they decided to keep looking.

It's interesting that when the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus with their master's question, "Are you the one?" Jesus didn't reply, "*Of course I'm the one. And here are reasons one, two, and three.*" He didn't offer his Davidic pedigree. He didn't mention that he was born of a Virgin and angels heralded his birth. He didn't remind John of the Voice that had spoken from heaven at the moment of his baptism. Instead, he replied, "*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.*"

In effect, he told John's messengers to go back to their imprisoned leader and tell him what they had experienced — what they had seen with their own eyes and heard with their own ears. The blind, the lame, the leper, the deaf and the dead were symbolic of sinners and excommunicated outcasts — and they were at the heart of Jesus' ministry. Isaiah had long ago said that the redemption and healing of such as these would be the sign of God's saving work. With Jesus, the pariahs and the outsiders were finding their condition was no longer a barrier to experiencing God's love. As had been promised, weak hands and feeble knees were being strengthened, and fearful hearts were finding courage in Jesus' presence. "*Go and tell John what you hear and see... And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*"

John had expected and assumed that God's Messiah would come to humanity in a display of terrifying power, smiting the wicked with the iron rod of his righteous anger. Instead, Christ came in quietness, humility, and healing love. He didn't push people around. He just said "*Follow me.*" When people followed, their lives were changed. They didn't get rich. They weren't spared suffering. They didn't stop making mistakes. —But they found a center for their souls. They found "the peace that passes all understanding," and when they did, they were able to give themselves away in selfless love for others.

We have a challenge today. How can we answer a seeker — maybe someone who has left the church or who is about to leave — who asks us, *Is Jesus the one? Or should I keep looking?* Before we answer, perhaps we have to ask first, *Have you really met Jesus yet? What are you expecting?* For those of us who have come through our own experience to believe that Jesus is indeed "the One," I think the only honest answer we can give the seeker's question has to be a version of the answer Jesus sent to John the Baptist. We have to say, *Tell me what you hear and see. What do you hear in the conversation and see in the behavior of men and women who truly follow Christ?* Look at them. Listen to them. Notice the fearful who've grown bold and the greedy "takers" who have changed into "givers." See the proud who have become humble, the cruel who now are kind, and those once drowning in despair who've been filled with hope. Look at all the restless, driven souls who've discovered peace, the lost who've been found, the dead in heart who are now vibrantly alive.

Those who honestly look at the lives of his disciples can't avoid this perception: *Jesus changes people.* And the people Jesus changes change the world around them.

You can't be neutral about Jesus when you meet him and it finally dawns on you what he's really all about. Then, you find that either you must embrace him as Lord and Savior, or you must do your best to discredit him. Nobody in human history has ever compelled such a response from people. And why is that? I believe that it's for just one reason: Jesus is God incarnate, God in our flesh, God *with* us... yesterday, today, and tomorrow.