

Seeing the Unexpected

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Isaiah 35:1-10
Luke 1:46-55
Matthew 11:2-11

Why did you go out into the middle of nowhere? What were you hoping to see? Kansas prairie grass blowing in the wind? No? Well then, what did you go out there to see? Someone dressed in the latest fashions? You know you went to the wrong place. You go to New York or Paris for that. So what were you really looking for? A prophet? Oh, yes, you got that and so much more. (Matthew 11:7-9 paraphrase)

Jesus knows the people have been looking, but they may not know quite what they are looking for. John the Baptist doesn't have the same issue. He knows what he is looking for and he sets to work preparing the way for The Chosen One, who will no doubt look just like John himself. John prepares the way for this One and, despite his better instincts, baptizes Jesus in the Jordan.

But after that amazing moment in the water, Jesus disappears into the wilderness. Following 40 days of testing Jesus reappears and calls disciples to work with him, none of whom is John by the way. John may have been preparing the way, but he doesn't seem to have followed in that way, at least not that we are told. Jesus commences his work healing, teaching on the mountain, healing some more and occasionally challenging the religious leaders.

Matthew doesn't tell us anything more about John until we hear that he is in jail. It seems that life in prison has confused John, maybe caused him to doubt his own work. "Could this really be the Messiah? The one I preached about, the Chosen One? Because from here, Jesus doesn't really fit the profile I had in mind. There is no fire, no separating wheat from chaff. All that preaching, and I end up a prisoner of Herod."

John's questions trouble him enough that he sends his disciples to ask if Jesus is for real, if he is the one they have been waiting for. Jesus sends back a message quoting Isaiah, *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.*

Despite this description coming straight out of the tradition, it seems like this is still not what John was looking for or expecting. And besides, if Jesus is going to quote Isaiah why does he leave out the part about “freeing the captive?” The questioner is imprisoned after all. Could there be a more ironic or cruel omission? The Messiah? Really?

Are we all that different from John? We listen to the biblical texts that are chosen to prepare us, inform us, inspire us. We are instructed this Advent to come to church and try silence. We expect some big revelation and what do we get on Christmas Eve but a helpless, homeless baby. Where is the prophet? Where is the power? Where is the beauty?

Jesus says, “Tell John, tell the questioner, what you hear and see.”

What do we see? What do we hear? Probably by now most of you have seen and heard the You Tube videos of random acts of culture. We see people in their blissful consumption at the mall or department store. Suddenly someone stands up and we hear, “Hallelujah.” And the food court is a performance venue for Handel’s Hallelujah chorus. Shoppers and eaters are transformed into audience and musicians.

We see looks of shock and joy. We see tears brushed away. Amidst the music we hear exclamations of surprise and enthusiasm. We witness the eagerness of onlookers to share the experience by catching it all on cell phone. And because it so enchants us, even on a computer screen, we send the video on to our friends and families, “You have to see this. It is so delightful, so beautiful.”

Is this how it was when people saw Jesus heal someone, welcome someone to new life? It was so unexpected, the good news so astonishingly beautiful, that they just had to tell their friends. Going viral was a whole lot slower 2,000 years ago, but the message did eventually spread around the world.

Isaiah 35 tells us that the wilderness and the desert will rejoice, and the crocus will bloom – abundantly. What seems impossible will happen: water will spring up in the desert, the burning sand will become a pool of water, in fact the desert will become a swamp.

If we are reading the Washington Post, watching CNN and listening to National Public Radio, our own city and world can feel like a spiritual and metaphorical desert.

Do we notice that healing is taking place? Is there anywhere that we hear a message of good news to the poor?

Into this dry land a snippet of beauty breaks through. Our common computers water the soul. We watch as others see and hear. We smile, we laugh, we wipe a tear and we share it. Handel's Hallelujah is a crocus blooming in the desert.

In fact, as a former music teacher, I marvel at the resurgence of student acapella groups on high school and college campuses, the Hallelujah chorus breaking out in malls across the country, opera in a Spanish market. To me, all of these add up to a whole garden blooming in a wasteland. This much interest in classical music? It seems impossible. This creative sight and sound project is holy work in a world that often doesn't recognize the sacred or acknowledge that the human body is a vessel for God.

In our work, in our families, in the silence, we want to see, we want to know, we look and we want to find. But like John, sometimes we don't find what we are looking for. We experience the spiritual desert. Maybe those of us who can't stop wondering, or have stopped wondering at all, need to hear Jesus' response to John.

⁶ *...blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'*

One more beatitude that we have overlooked, this one for those who may be questioning. Blessed is the one who finds no stumbling block in Jesus. Listen. Look. Let yourself be drawn to those places where something unusual is occurring and you will be blessed. Don't get caught up in your own expectations, just see what is right in front of you.

Elijah and I have been reading Octavia Boone's Big Questions about Life, the Universe and Everything by Rebecca Rupp. Octavia's mother, the hippie turned mother turned lawyer, finally finds what she has been looking for all her life in the local fundamentalist church. This is an unwelcome shock to her husband and middle school daughter. Octavia is confused and angry when she is asked to go to Sunday school and embrace lessons that teach her to blindly obey her parents, give up Halloween and Christmas, stop showing her 12-year-old knees to the world and start planning her life as a "help meet."

Octavia decides that her only hope is to rationally prove that this new life choice of her mother's is ridiculous. What other power does a 12-year-old have, but the school

science fair project? She decides to grow bean seeds. She lets half of them grow on their own, with water and sun of course. The other half she also nurtures with prayer. She is quite sure that there will be some tangible difference in the growth and her mother will have to see that prayer is foolish and leave the “Fellowship of the Redeemer.” Elijah’s summary of this endeavor — “it crashed and burned.”

Like Octavia, many of us have big questions about science, space exploration, the ways that our brains and bodies work or don’t, how our food is produced, why there is injustice in the world, how God works, how prayer works. We want to see, we want to understand, we want to hear it explained.

But Jesus says we don’t have to understand it all, we don’t even have to believe it all, we just have to watch and listen, go with the flow, not fight the work God is doing and join in when we are ready.

John is part of God’s work, but in jail things begin to look different. He starts to doubt. “Perhaps I was wrong. Maybe Jesus isn’t really The One.” But Jesus sends the message to John that if he can see what God has been doing he will be blessed. In fact, Jesus says, John himself is the greatest one ever born and yet in the strange new reign to come, the lowliest person is ahead of him.

Jesus must have learned this from his own mother’s song -

*I am lowly as a child but I know from this day forward
That my name will be remembered
for all will call me blessed.* (from David Haas based on Luke 1:46-55)

As the nights get longer, as Christmas draws closer, let us continue to prepare our hearts and homes, open our ears and eyes. We may not always understand, but seeing and hearing is a first step. *The blind see, the deaf hear, what was dead receives new life.* This is good news. Our very human bodies can help to bring Christ to the world again. Our own observations and celebrations are a participation in the coming reign of Christ.

“What are you looking for? A prophet? Oh, you got that and so much more.”