

MATTHEW 11:2–6

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

⁴ Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

SERMON: WHAT DO YOU SEE?

This morning we get to listen in on an exchange between John the Baptist and Jesus. This conversation had to take place through intermediaries because when we enter the story John was occupied – he was sitting in jail and not far from his execution.

Our first encounter with John both he and Jesus were still *in utero* – unborn children. Their mothers were cousins, and when Mary with Jesus entered the home of Elizabeth, the reports say that John leapt within Elizabeth’s womb. Clearly there was some kind of recognition – a strong response to Jesus’ presence. We also get our first clue that John was not at all shy or held back.

So it comes as no surprise that the next time we hear about John he is being his usual outspoken, in-your-face self. We find him down by the river baptizing folks and admonishing them to stay on the straight and narrow, because change was coming.

John was not at all wishy-washy; he was never unsure of his message, and not afraid to speak it boldly. To those who were privileged and sure of their positions – the elite and powerful, the ones most people bow to – he said ‘You writhing bunch of snakes! Who said you could come here? God’s day is coming and it’s not looking good for you, unless you make some deep, deep changes.’

As he was speaking of the one who was to come along came Jesus, asking to be baptized. John, perhaps for the first time in his life, was taken aback, suddenly unsure. ‘Shouldn’t you be baptizing me?’ he asked. ‘Aren’t you the lamb of God?’

Jesus assured him that all was in good order, that this was the way things should be, and as the baptism proceeded the heavens opened up and that great pronouncement from God was heard, ‘You are my Son, my beloved. In you I am well pleased.’

After this, John continued to baptize people in the river, but made a point of saying about Jesus ‘Watch this guy – he’s going to be big. I’m going to fade away, but he’s going to grow and he’s not going to stop.’

Our introduction to John show us a man who was quite sure of himself. He knew who Jesus was, and he knew who he was – the announcer of the Son of God. And he took his job quite seriously, so seriously in fact that he was about to be killed because he dared tell Herod that his sham of a marriage to the woman who left his brother to be with him was an abomination before God.

Everything we know about John paints a picture of a man with no room in his life for doubt. He's a man who doesn't hesitate to burn bridges because he knows where he's headed and he won't need to come back.

But in this morning's reading John is presented in a different light. The man who previously said 'Behold the lamb of God, whose sandals I am not worthy to tie,' now sends a message asking 'Are you really the one? Was I wrong, should I be looking for someone else?'

Did prison soften John up? Did being locked up cause him to doubt?

Now, there is some comfort for us in knowing that even a man with a faith as solid as John's that there is room for doubt. We rarely read of any biblical figure who didn't struggle with doubt at some point, so that is an encouragement for us. It reassures us that even though we too have times of struggle in which we are unsure of anything, that doesn't disqualify us or make us second-rate Christians. It just means we're human.

But, back to John. I'm not sure that it was simply prison that made John question Jesus' identity. If anything, I would think that would strengthen his resolve. It was something about Jesus himself – something was just not adding up.

The text reads 'When John heard....what Jesus was doing, he sent word to him to ask Are you the one, or should we wait for another?'

Something that Jesus was doing did not seem right to John and made him question. He was not acting as John thought the Messiah should.

Jesus had not launched the kingdom in any way John could recognise. Jesus had not recruited an army either of men or of fiery angels, only a rag-tag handful of misfits. There was no liberation of Israel on the horizon, no looming defeat of the Roman oppressors, no reformation of the burdensome temple system.

The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world was not taking away Herod's sin.

Maybe, thought John, he was mistaken. That would be a crushing realization – remember John had been fully sold out to announcing the immanent inbreaking of God as Messiah – he had no fallback plan.

So he sent word to Jesus, asking what was going on. And Jesus responded by saying

'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.'

If I were John, my reaction probably would be 'Lovely. Good for the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf and the dead. However Jesus, you may notice that I, your biggest promoter, am still in prison. And by the way that isn't the original mission statement, you're missing something pretty important to the present situation. Do you remember that day in the synagogue? There was a little something said about release for the captives, and setting the oppressed free. Did you forget that part?'

We don't get to hear John's response to Jesus' cryptic answer to his question. Perhaps that's just as well. By answering as he did, Jesus seems to have a purpose in mind.

He didn't give a yes or no response. In effect, he said to John 'I cannot answer for you. You have to decide on your own whether I am for real. Look at the evidence – what do you see?'

Christ's answer is exactly the same when we ask the question. 'Look around you. What is being done in my name? Look at the fruit I am producing, and then you decide who I am.'

So let's do just that. What do we see? What evidence is there that Jesus is in our midst?

To begin with, the Lord has anointed us. We are baptized, but more importantly we are filled with the Spirit that blesses and empowers us. We have an abundance of gifts to share. That is our starting point.

Why are we anointed?

We are anointed to bring good news to the poor.

We do this through our mitten tree that benefits the folks who go to Evangel Hall and the Winnipeg Inner city mission, through blessing bags, Quetzal House Christmas presents, our support of the school in the dump in Guatemala, through the many initiatives of the PWS&D, grocery bags, Food Basic gift cards, the Thanksgiving food drive, the Christmas food drive that we've just wrapped up.

As well as meeting physical needs, Norfolk's disadvantaged also receive prayer, counseling, and a friendly face and listening ear when they come. One of my friends out there shared with me that the worst part of his situation was not so much the hunger or homelessness – it is the lack of human contact. People cross the street to avoid him, nobody wants to talk to him – certainly not shake his hand. Good news can sometimes be as simple as making eye contact and learning somebody's name.

Our food ministry is not limited to people who are disadvantaged. Food builds community and we feed lots of people – just a couple hours ago we enjoyed breakfast together thanks to the guys who operate the men’s breakfast.

We have pancake suppers, Lenten lunches, bake sales, pie sales, and lunches and teas with our neighbours at St. Paul’s Court, as well as coffee and social times after every worship service. The hungry are fed.

Recovery of sight to the blind – we’re not doing a lot of making the scales fall from people’s eyes in a physical sense here, but the bible many times equates blindness with lack of understanding. We offer understanding, sight to the blind, through bible studies, Sunday school, the Langford study, and each year we help equip a new healer through our DC MacDonald scholarship.

We spread good news whenever someone we know is in crisis – ill, bereaved, or suffering – as we surround them with love and caring. Our outreach to St. Paul’s court, flowers sent to nursing home residents and those who are unable to get out to services here, the events hosted by the WMS. All of these are examples of good news being shared.

Strangers are welcomed – this year we hosted four community bbq’s for the migrant workers who have left family and security behind to work in a foreign country. We support the bringing up of a Jamaican preacher to minister to the island workers, and we hosted two lively worship services with them.

We also work with a group whose focus is on helping refugees settle into new lives in Simcoe – helping with such things as childcare, tutoring, and language classes.

We uphold marginalized women and children through our support of the Pregnancy Center that helps young families learn to cook, parent, manage a household, and also directly helps by giving away clothing, diapers, bottles, and food.

I have seen the oppressed set free of addictions, of unhealthy relationships, poor living conditions, anger, unforgiveness, sins they couldn’t recompense for, trauma that held them down.

We are constantly proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favour. This is what we are doing right now in worship, we do it at Friendship in Faith, our nursing home ministry, our hospital on call ministry.

We proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour in words, but also most expressively in song through our choir and music ministry.

In this sanctuary waters break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand becomes a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the tongues of the speechless sing for joy.

I'm quickly running through a list of just some of the ways Jesus' mandate is being fulfilled, but I could talk all day about all the things done in Jesus' name in and through St. Paul's. There are many, many actions done on a daily basis by all the individuals that make up this community – acts of caring, sharing, and community building.

These stories of love, help, and giving simply would not take place were we not a community centred around Jesus. I'm not saying that non-church folk don't do good things - they do - but I rarely see such sustained and intentional loving, giving, and caring for the marginalized outside of Christian circles, or service groups founded by Christians.

So, when we are faced with the question 'Is Jesus the Messiah, the anointed Son of God?' whether that question comes from someone else or from ourselves, consider Jesus' own response. 'What do you see? Are the hungry fed? Are strangers welcomed? Is good news being shared? Are the oppressed set free and the blind made to see? Is the time of the Lord's favour being proclaimed?'

It is clear to me that the answer to all of this is clearly yes. Not perfectly, not fully, and not everywhere. But within this community certainly all of these things are being done. Since that is the case, then Jesus is in fact the Messiah – and what's more, Jesus walks among us. There is no other reason that we do these things in his name.

Jesus is present. Our whole reason for being is to be witnesses to this fact, witnesses in Norfolk to the transforming love of Jesus.

Amen.