

Visions of Peace: Healing and Wholeness

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, December 11, 2022.

Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11

John the Baptist was a prophet, a messenger from God, a voice crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord." John prepared the way for Jesus' ministry.

John wandered in the wilderness, preaching of repentance and the coming reign of God, and baptizing people in the Jordan River. Crowds flocked to him. Indeed, he was so popular that he was seen as a potential threat to the established order. King Herod, the ruler of Galilee, feared that John's popularity might lead people to rebellion, and Herod didn't want to take that chance. So he had John arrested and imprisoned in a palace-fortress near the Dead Sea. And that is where we find John in this morning's reading from the gospel of Matthew – languishing in prison, his voice effectively silenced. John the prophet had become John the political prisoner. He was forced to sit on the sidelines, while Jesus took up where John left off.

John the Baptist faced an uncertain future. What would become of him? Would he eventually be released? Would he be kept there in prison for the rest of his life? Would he be executed? He didn't know what would happen to him. But as the days and weeks and months went by, he had a lot of time to think. And as he looked back on his life he began to be tormented by self-doubt. He had put himself out there in the world, a larger-than-life figure. He had challenged people to turn their lives around. He had spoken truth to power, confronting both religious and political authorities. Everything he had done was to prepare the way for another, for someone more powerful than he, who was to come after him – the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One.

When Jesus first came along, John was sure he was the One. Remember that it was John who baptized Jesus in the Jordan River.

But now, as John sat in prison, he began to have doubts. He wasn't so sure about Jesus. Reports about what Jesus was doing had gotten back to him: Jesus was teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of the coming reign of God, and healing people of their diseases and infirmities. It was all well and good what Jesus was doing, but it was not at all what John had been expecting. John had expected the Messiah to be the new King of Israel in the family line of David, which meant that Herod would be ousted from power. John had expected the Messiah to save God's people from oppression, to liberate them from Roman occupation. He had expected the Messiah to carry out the final judgment, to lay the ax at the root of the trees and to see that every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. But Herod was still in power, and John was still in prison. Not much had changed it seemed. If Jesus was the Messiah, he was turning out to be a very different kind of Messiah from what John had expected.

John may speak for those in the church today who were once sure of their faith but now are not so sure, those who have begun to wonder whether Jesus' way of love and compassion can ever really work in a world of violence and injustice, where economic and political elites hold most of the power. Is there really a God who is watching us, who knows and cares about what is going on in the world? Does God have a plan? Is God ultimately in charge? And if so, is Jesus the definitive revelation of that God, or should we look elsewhere for answers to our ultimate questions? If you've ever asked such questions, if you have some doubts, you are in good company. John was having his own doubts about Jesus, and he was Jesus' contemporary. He knew Jesus personally, in the flesh.

Well, somehow, John is able to get a message to his disciples to go to Jesus and ask him straight out: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus responds, but he doesn't give a simple yes or no answer. Jesus doesn't say, "Yes, go and tell John that I am the One, I am the Messiah. You need look no further." No, instead, he urges John's disciples to look and listen, to see and hear what is going on in the world around them and to report their observations back to John. "Go and tell John what you hear and see," Jesus says, "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." Here Jesus is almost quoting from Isaiah 35,

which we also heard read this morning: “Then shall blind eyes be opened and deaf ears unstopped; then shall those who are lame leap like a hart and mute tongues sing for joy.” Jesus is pointing out that people’s lives are being transformed, God’s kingdom is breaking in, and the world is being changed forever.

Indeed, by alluding to Isaiah 35, Jesus points John’s disciples and us to the transformative image of God greening the desert. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. . . . For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.”

Now, as I’m from the East Coast, whenever I used to read this passage, I thought of it as a poetic image, a beautiful vision, something miraculous that never actually happens. In my mind, deserts were dry, except for the occasional oasis. Deserts, by definition, didn’t have streams or pools of water. That’s what I thought, anyway, until I began living here and saw the desert bloom: poppies and Indian paintbrush; yucca, cholla, and prickly pear; thistle and Spanish broom.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.” The Messiah entering into the world has the same transformative power as streams of living water in a desert. They both allow new life to blossom and flourish.

Jesus comes to us in the dry and parched places in our lives to offer us life-giving water that can refresh us, renew us, and restore us to new life. When we are tired and overworked and feel we have nothing more of ourselves to give, we can find rest in Jesus. When we are sad and depressed and feel like we will never be ourselves again, we can find solace in Jesus’ loving embrace. When we are sick or injured, we can find comfort in Jesus’ healing touch. When we are in conflict with a family member or coworker, we can find peace in Jesus’ quiet presence. When we feel isolated and alone, we can find a friend in Jesus.

Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah, and his coming is profoundly transformative. God's transforming power is at work in Jesus. And Jesus is able to use that divine power to transform us.

But Jesus is a different kind of Messiah all together. Jesus doesn't come to raise an army of freedom fighters. He comes to build a community of disciples. Jesus doesn't come to wage war. He comes to bring peace. Jesus doesn't come in judgment. He comes in love. Far from being a Christ of condemnation, Jesus is the Christ of compassion, the one who brings healing and wholeness to a hurting and broken world.

In this passage, Matthew presents Jesus as a healer, a miracle worker. Here salvation is concrete. Individual human beings are saved from their afflictions. Their brokenness is made whole. Their suffering is overcome.

What might this passage in Matthew have to say to the church today? Well, the church is the body of Christ. The church is the embodiment of Christ's presence in the world. As the church, we have been entrusted with the work and ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. Or as the Rev. William Sloane Coffin of Riverside Church used to say: "If Christ is God's love personified, the church is God's love organized."

And so, just as Jesus was a source of healing and compassion in the world, so too the church today ought to be a source of healing and compassion in the world. Where people are broken, we are to restore them to wholeness. Where people are divided, we are to be agents of reconciliation. Where people are isolated, we are to offer them community. Where people are marginalized, we are to welcome them into full membership in the household of God.

We need to be about God's business of transforming the world. But to do so effectively, we need to be transformed ourselves by the power of Jesus Christ.

So, in this season of Advent, we prepare for Christ's coming. We prepare our hearts and minds to be transformed by the birth of Jesus. For we know that when Christ is born in us, our lives are changed forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.