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“What the Signs of Promise Are”

A meditation by Robert L. Yoder

Wednesday of the Second Week of Advent (Year A)

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Isaiah 35:1–10; Luke 1:46–55; Matthew 11:2–11

December is a time of anticipation. Little children, look forward to the visit from Santa. Each day seems like an eternity. Families, separated by time and space, look forward to being reunited around a family table enjoying the presence of one another, catching up on what has been happening in life, and savoring the dreams of one another. A young couple, who has set December as the time of the exchange of vows, longs for the moment when they shall become one through a ceremony before friends and God. Certainly a prisoner, whose sentence ends in December, finds that the day of release is almost as a day of rebirth.

The people of Israel had been living in anticipation as well. In Advent we often sing:

*Watchman, tell us of the night,
What its signs of promise are.
Traveler, o'er yon mountain's height,
See that glory beaming star.
Watchman, does its beauteous ray
Aught of joy or hope foretell?
Traveler, yes; it brings the day,
Promised day of Israel.¹*

¹ John Bowring, “Watchman, Tell Us of the Night,” *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 20.

Israel was longing for its promised day. The baptizing country prophet named John had cast his role as one who would prepare the way for the coming Messiah. As we looked in on him this evening, we see him now in prison, soon to be beheaded. No doubt his own ideas of the Messiah were colored by the common belief that the Messiah would be a noble, military figure who would rid the world of Roman occupation and bring in a new history of peace for the Jewish nation. This Jesus, who we sometimes call the Prince of Peace, did not seem to fit that description. So we read, “When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’”

When we look to understand Jesus we turn to the scriptures to see how the early church understood him. But it’s not a sure way of coming to one, single, compelling picture. Lay the contents of all four gospels side by side, and you will discover that surprisingly few items are common to all four. We do not find the Christmas story in all four, or the Transfiguration. The Sermon on the Mount, the Lord’s Prayer, and our favorite parables are not universally recorded. Neither is the calling of James and John, the raising of Lazarus, or the doubting of Thomas found in every gospel.

Few things from the thirty-some years of Jesus’ life are found in all four canonical gospels. The bulk of the overlap is limited to just one week of his life—that final, eventful week in Jerusalem.

In light of that select and crucial intersection of the sets, we should be impressed to discover that the ministry of John the Baptist appears in all four gospels.

I don’t know that our preaching accords John such importance, but the gospel writers recognize his importance. And Jesus affirms John’s importance in the most dramatic terms: “Among those born of women not one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.”

Jesus’ high praise for John comes at an interesting moment: doubt. In prison, we catch a glimpse of wavering just a bit from John’s characteristic boldness and

authoritative certainty. Perhaps when one's own future is so uncertain, every other thing seems somewhat less certain as well. Specifically, John was uncertain whether Jesus was "the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

At the beginning of this century, in Germany, a brilliant young man began studying theology in the German Universities. By age 24, he was lecturing in systematic theology at Berlin University. He was arrested by the Gestapo for his opposition to the Nazi regime in Germany and was sent to prison. When that prison was destroyed by an air raid, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was transferred to another prison, and from there to other concentration camps until he was executed in April 1945, by special order. I can only wonder, as he suffered under those miserable conditions from his prison cell, did he ever wonder to himself, "Is Jesus really the one who is to come?"

Jesus sends John's messengers back to him with a strong affirmation rooted in Jesus' own powerful deeds—"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." Jesus' response is not a direct quote of the poetry in our Isaiah 35 lection, but the elements are all there. Isaiah anticipates the day when "the eyes of the blind will be opened"—check!—"the ears of the deaf unstopped"—check!—and "the lame shall leap like a deer"—check!

It is interesting to note that Jesus, who elsewhere bemoans and denies requests for a sign, should point John to signs for the proof of Jesus' identity and the confirmation of John's faith. Of course, Jesus' response might rightly be understood as the fulfillment of prophecy. And, furthermore, the signs to which Jesus pointed in this episode were performed to bless, heal, and free people; in the cases where doubters (or even challengers) asked for a sign, it would have been an artificial and self-serving use of God's power.

Jesus ranks John in two ways: he is greater than anyone born of women, yet less than the least in the kingdom of heaven. John the Baptist seems to be the very hinge of history—greater than all who had come prior to the kingdom while proclaiming the coming of that future kingdom now at hand.

Conclusion: This season of Advent invites us to consider our posture and practice in regard to the Lord's coming. The heroes of the season are people like Simeon, whose expectation did not diminish with waiting; the magi, who made every effort they could to greet and worship properly the newborn king; and John the Baptist, who leapt for joy *in utero* and who "prepared the way of the Lord" in his ministry.

Meanwhile, the terrible and tragic disappointments of the season include the antagonistic Herod, whose fear and paranoia led him to an unimaginable response; the all-head-but-no-heart scribes, who pointed the magi to Bethlehem but did not go themselves; and the too-busy Jerusalem taxpayers who never noticed the birth of Jesus.

Now it is our turn to wait for his coming. As we wait, whose response do our lives most resemble? To what extent are we at the corner, watching and waiting, straining to see? Are we eager to meet him part way? Conversely, to what extent are we indifferent and preoccupied? Are we not thinking about him because we are so distracted watching television, playing with our toys, or centering our lives in the shopping and festivities of this season? Have we forgotten that this might be the day he comes?