

Matthew 11:1-10  
December 12, 2010

South Plains

### Disappointment and Joy

Driving down US 250 last week I heard the radio announce a new piece of Christmas music, new to me at least. It was advertised as an arrangement of the Advent tune, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," that haunting 15<sup>th</sup> century melody we sang at the beginning of worship. However, the new arrangement begins with drums that make a stirring call to worship instead of the plaintive cry of hope. I was disappointed because it was not what I expected.

John the Baptist expected Emmanuel, a Messiah who would burst on the scene with drums and a militant bearing, a Messiah who would administer justice and demonstrate an irresistible righteousness. Last week we heard Matthew's version of John's preaching:

Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.... (followed by a warning) But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Matt 1:2 & 3)

John was disappointed that Jesus was not the Messiah he expected. John has seen very little burning.

Of all the holidays on the calendar, this is the season when each person has his or her own script of expectations for how the celebration ought to unfold. Whether our emphasis falls on family gatherings, Christmas parties, presents under the tree, tables

groaning with food or holiday music, this is the season that we expect things to work out the way we desperately want them to work out. We can stand a few miscues and hiccups, but we do not want major disappointments at Christmas.

John the Baptist was dealing with major disappointments. After baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan, John had high hopes for his leadership as he heard reports of Jesus' healing and preaching, his compassion for the poor and his confrontations with the Pharisees. The crowds who followed this new rabbi might have given John reason to expect a sea change in Israel. But, as the months passed Jesus did nothing to stamp out the religious establishment that John had called "you brood of vipers." As for Rome, the Roman boot was so firmly planted on the neck of the Jews that Herod arrested John with barely a peep of protest. Surely John suspected that he would never leave Herod's prison alive. That was not his main concern. He wanted to know that the kingdom of heaven was near enough that his preaching had not been in vain. He expected much from Jesus and he was disappointed so little had happened according to his script.

Therefore John sends word by his disciples that he wants to know from Jesus himself, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" That's a question lurking in the shadows behind other disappointments that inevitably plague this holiday. When Elizabeth Edwards' cancer reappeared, someone

brought up the subject of her faith. She was a strong, resilient woman who had already survived the loss of a son to an automobile accident. She replied with typical forthrightness, "I cannot pray for healing to a God who would blow away a sixteen year old boy in an accident." I like to think that was not her dismissal of the God and Father of Jesus Christ, but was rather her maturing conviction that God's goodness was larger and more mysterious, and that she was refining her faith. Every loss, every disappointment raises the question again, especially during the holiday season: Is Jesus the one in whom we should place our hope, or should we wait for another? Is the birth of Jesus, really the birth of the Christ who can deliver me from the disappointments and tragedies I face? Is Jesus the Savior?

On one level we might hear this as a theoretical question about the nature of the Messiah: What kind of Messiah or Christ did the Old Testament expect? How did Jesus see himself? Should we understand the mission of the Messiah in terms of political changes in our government, or social changes starting in the churches, or personal changes that affect only individuals? We could debate those questions all day. For John the Baptist and for anyone dealing with life-threatening disappointments, the question is much more existential: What does Jesus have to do with me and my life, my captivity to circumstances, my losses?

Jesus replies with two different kinds of answers in the verses that follow. I want to deal with his second

response first. He flips the question around for the crowds of people who have overheard the exchange with John's disciples. Who were you expecting with John the Baptist? Were you disappointed that he is a prophet and not a political leader in a royal palace wearing soft robes? Did you really think this prophet would be shaking in the midst of controversy the way a reed shakes in the wind? No. John the Baptist is greater than anyone before him; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. In other words, John's task has been to prepare the way. And, he's accomplished that. His work is done. The kingdom is indeed near at hand. That's one answer for those who question whether Jesus is the Messiah.

Now for Jesus' first response: Look at what's happening around you, he 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 of Jesus brought to them (Matt 11:5)." Believe the gospel according to Isaiah:

The eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

(Isaiah 35:5-6)

Friends, when the speechless are singing for joy, don't overlook the real blessings of the gospel, the good news. Your expectations for a radical and immediate change in the world will not be met by this Christ. This Messiah does not come with a violent upheaval of the status quo. All the wrongs and injustices of our present day will not

be put right tomorrow. This Messiah comes in gentleness and love. It may not be what you want, but this is God's way.

Despite the words of Isaiah, the contemporaries of Jesus and John did not seem to expect a Healer, a Life-giver, a Good News Messiah. They wanted political change, period. Politics was not Jesus' job. That's the first part of Jesus' response to John's disappointment.

Beyond those undeniable blessings that Jesus brought in the work of his ministry, there is the person of Jesus himself, a personality so powerful that it shook the political structures of this world. Jesus of Nazareth was a man, a real person born as any other baby who grew up with all the limitations and temptations that afflict every human being. The difference between Jesus and other human beings was the persistent, determined, imaginative and humble, tough love that he demonstrated at every turn. It was a godly love that could be impatient with slow disciples and confrontational with the unholy. Always it was a very human love.

This love, this insistent goodness would eventually mean that Jesus runs afoul of the Jewish leaders who feared his loving criticism. He frightened kings who felt so threatened by the expectations surrounding him that Herod would slaughter innocent children as collateral damage to the defense of his throne. He unsettled Pilate so much that the Governor would throw up his hands just to get this gentle Jesus out of his courtyard. John and

the disciples of the Baptist would not be able to appreciate the power of a loving Jesus until after the resurrection.

Nevertheless, the resurrection would confirm the rightness of this Messiah. His love conquered the violence and the sin and the death so evident in his world and in our own. It's not just the speechless who can sing for joy at his birth. Every person who knows the freedom of forgiveness, the clarity of a meaningful life, the enthusiasm of real hope, the satisfaction of helping another, and the joy of life – every one of us can sing for joy. John the Baptist had the right goal in mind for the kingdom. He just didn't know how God would bring the kingdom nearer and nearer by means of a real human person, a person who would die for his friends.

The other thing John did not know and could not foresee was the joy the disciples of Jesus would experience in following his example and living his way. It is not the joy of balanced budgets in the federal government or even balanced household budgets. Nor is it the joy of good health unsullied by disease or accident. It's the joy of friendship that endures through tough times. It's the joy of hope that believes in resurrection life. It's the joy of random acts of kindness, undeserved and unasked for. It's the joy of knowing, not what, but in whom we believe. It's the settled joy of shared love.

Jesus tells John that despite the disappointments life throws at us, when we know what to look for, when the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes and ears, we will see what God is doing all around us and we will know real joy.