

“Running Back”

Matthew 11: 1 – 15

Makemie Presbyterian Church

December 13, 2009 Third Sunday of Advent

¹Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach & proclaim his message in their cities. ²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ & said to him,

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

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

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you & more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead

of you, who will prepare your way before you.' ¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, & the violent take it by force. ¹³For all the prophets & the law prophesied until John came; ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵Let anyone with ears listen!

This ends the reading.

Have you been to the mall lately? Or to the grocery store? Have you been put on hold to the strains of holiday Muzak? Anywhere you go you're likely to hear people singing variations on "Merry Christmas." But it will not be a "Merry" Christmas for many people.

This season of preparation in the Church for Christ's coming doesn't always seem to relate to what the world is going through. Some people see the weeks before Christmas as something to endure more than enjoy. As Christians we look forward with joy. Or, do we? There's more depression around Christmas time than any other time of the year. There's something that keeps many people from really experiencing the joy of Christmas.

I see it in the overworked faces of pastors trying to survive the demands of Advent. I see it in the resigned faces of you all, who keep coming to worship – week after week – even when you might wonder why? And sometimes I see it in my own face, when I pause long enough before the mirror to examine my soul.

We have abandoned that first love we had for Christ.

Remember that first love? The talking all night, the laughing and crying together, the belief that nothing else matters – and that everything

simultaneously does – because that which matters most has been taken care of? Somebody knows us completely & loves us unconditionally. We can't help but revel in such love.

I guess we all have to grow up sometime – don't we? How long can first love last? Isn't it a mark of maturity to realize that those long, beautiful nights can't last forever? If we are keeping up with our commitments, what more can be expected?

“More” insists the One who places his right hand on us, who reassuringly touches our faces. “I want more than good works, more than high energy, more than faultless allegiance. I want relationship. I want fellowship. I want you to love me, again.”

All believers wrestle with the ideal Christian self we want to be & the self we really are. That tension can be so exhausting that we all experience spiritual fatigue & pretense & often do not realize it until something divine intrudes upon our world to wake us up.

Even John the Baptist in our Gospel lesson today is feeling pretty blue. He's in a pretty scary situation when he sends his friends to confront Jesus. "Are you the one?" he asks.

There is a culture of football over at my house. And when I heard my mother, who has never followed football in her life, never ever, ask Jaxon, "When do they announce the Heisman trophy winner?" I knew it was time to give to you this analogy of John the Baptist & Jesus as football players.

I think, perhaps that John the Baptist saw himself as a blocker, a great blocker like the 1940's Redskin Blocker Clyde Shugart, in the football game -- a blocker for the running back -- the Messiah. John the Baptist was clearing the way through the defense, the obstacles, opening up a path for the Messiah to score a victory over the rival team, the opponents. John made some beautiful blocks... preaching his heart out, baptizing until he was waterlogged, even sacrificing his BODY blocking for the Messiah. But when John sneaks a look back over his shoulder; the Messiah doesn't even seem to be running. It seems in fact that, Jesus appears to have come to a stop & is helping some injured players, who are not even on his team! That's not what the Messiah should be doing! Should he?

Well what is clear is that John plays a decisive role in the history of salvation, forming a dividing line. He is the last & the greatest of the prophets; a prophet like Elijah that stands at the turning of an era.

Today's gospel lesson finds John behind bars. He might be thinking, "God, where did I go wrong? I did what I thought you wanted. I said what I thought you wanted me to say. You told me that Messiah was coming. But where is he?"

"Where's the fire, the ax, the judgment he's supposed to bring? And why, if he's here, would he let me stay in this place? I thought I knew my cousin pretty well. I remember that day in the Jordan when I baptized him. What a glorious day. God, your whole plan was being put into play. But, where is he now? Why isn't he doing what I said he would do? Is he really the one or should I look for another?"

Advent stuff. Advent is not just a season of still Bethlehem's & cooing turtledoves. This season finds many people feeling like John might have: imprisoned, wondering to themselves, "Are you the One, Jesus? Can you speak to me in my prison? Behind my bars of pain? Are you the One? Or should we look for another?"

Many people find themselves in a prison called loneliness this time of year: Military personnel serving far from home. Shut-ins with few family & friends, even people who know lots of people & maybe have a large family,

but who strangely feel very much alone. You can be alone, you know, even in a Christmas crowd.

Lonely people often think nobody cares about what they need or think. People ask, "How are you doing?" But don't really want to take the time to listen to the answer. It seems that no one cares. In loneliness it's easy to wonder if even God cares.

Are you the One, Jesus? Can you help us cut through these translucent bars of stone; loneliness? Or should we look for another?

Others find themselves imprisoned in a fortress of fear at Christmas: fear about the future, fear for their families, fear for their own health and well being. John the Baptist must have felt fear as he waited day after day for word of his own fate. Or imagine the fear for the family whose main wage earner has just been laid off at Christmas! What's this going to do to the family? What about the future? It could be a lean Christmas for a family in that situation.

Are you the One, Jesus? Can you help us face and overcome our fears? Or should we look for another?

Christmas finds many people locked in prisons of grief: the loss of a parent, a grandparent, a child, or friend; a husband or wife who passed away during the year & won't be here for the holiday. Can the light of Christmas penetrate such deep darkness? Will Christmas ever be the same?

Are you the One, Jesus? Can you bring light into this darkest of prison cells? Or should we look for another?

John the Baptist sent some of his followers to spy on Jesus, to ask this same question: Are you the one? And, basically, Jesus said, "Look around you at the evidence, and decide for yourselves. What does the evidence show?"

Have the blind received sight? Remember the blind man Jesus met on the road? Making a paste from the dust in the road, Jesus touched his eyes & his vision returned. Ask that man, "Is he the One?" Ask the millions of others who have been blind to the truth about themselves & about God, but who've found that Jesus opened their eyes. Ask them, "Is he the One?"

Have the lame walked? Go & ask the man whose friends lowered him through the roof on a mat before Jesus because the man was paralyzed.

Ask him, if you can catch up with him, "Is he the One?" And ask the thousands whose feet never seemed strong enough to stay on the right paths but in Jesus have found the strength to turn around & walk with God. Ask them, "Is he the One?"

Have the prisoners been released? Ask that dying thief beside Jesus on the cross, who that very day knew paradise. Ask him, "Is he the One?" And ask the countless numbers who have found Jesus to be the liberator from the prison of drugs, greed, loneliness, & fear. Ask them, "Is he the One?"

But what of that greatest fear, that great prison? What of death? Matthew, who wrote today's gospel, would encourage us to ask the father whose daughter had died, who heard those simple words, "Little one, arise." Ask that father, "Is he the One?" And ask all those who have received in Jesus a resurrection from the dead, an abundant life, a new beginning. Ask them how much difference it makes facing death when the One who rose from the dead promises eternal life to all who believe in him. Ask them, "Is he the One?"

Are you the One, Jesus? Can you speak to us behind our thick prison walls this Christmas? Can you give strength to our feet? sight to our eyes? hope to our hearts? wholeness to our brokenness? life to our death?

Are you the One, Jesus?

And, Jesus might answer, "Are YOU the one? I live in you. You are my body in today's world. It is through you that I can touch people's hearts, bring wholeness to their brokenness, and set them free to love. With your hands I can reach out to the lonely. With your words I can comfort the grieving. With your voice I can proclaim good news to the poor."

Jesus asks you today, "Are you the one, or am I to wait for another?"