

No Wind, No Fire, and God

Matthew 11: 2 – 11

Makemie Presbyterian Church

October 21, 2007

Messengers from John the Baptist

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?'

Jesus answered them, '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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

As 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? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? No, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”

Truly 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.

The gospel of Christ.

What I'm going to say to you today. You may find difficult to believe. This is the twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time, next Sunday is Reformation Sunday, and we are on our way to advent. Where we will meet John the Baptist, he was a striking man and full of fire. Calling on the people to repent and get their act together to prepare because the reign of God is at the door; and at the door is God's Messiah the Christ. “Oh, he's stronger than I am, he's a man of wind, a man of fire, he is a man of God.”

Well, the voice of John, fine & strong & stirring the desert & all the people who gathered. That voice is now silent. For while he was holding service the police came; bound him, arrested him, took him away. Now I know you are probably saying to yourselves, “Yeah, well that's what they ought to do. Most preachers should be arrested for their sermons.” And I suppose that's the case. But not for John. Not John. His sermons were not that poor. What really happens here? Herod Antipas was the ruler of

Galilee at the time of John's preaching. He was one of the sons of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas ruled in Galilee and his brother Philip ruled to the land just north of there which is today a part of Syria. Herod Antipas brother Philip was married to their niece. Now follow this closely, its going to be hard. Philip was married to his niece. The daughter of another brother of theirs, Aristophilus. While his back was turned, that is while Philip's back was turned, his brother, Herod Antipas the ruler of Galilee took her to be his wife. Herod Antipas, took Herodius, his niece to be his wife. Two brothers married to a niece, for goodness sakes. Well John was kind of an old fashioned preacher and he didn't think too highly of incest & adultery and so he hurled this sin into the teeth of the ruler Herod Antipas. And of course the ruler can't stand to have some preacher out there yelling against the royal palace. Charging them with all kind of sin. Its not good politics. And so he has John arrested. And John is put in prison. And the voice of John is silent. The crowd has dispersed. Their heads are down. They're wondering what is going to happen next. "Is anything going to happen now? Is it all over? Was our hope just really a dream? Is all the promise of the coming of a messiah, not really true? If the messenger is silent what of the message? Is there any stock to be put in there at all?"

The sound of blowing sand erases the footprints of the crowd that came to hear John. Some of them leaving, still wet from their baptism. And within an hour, you would never know there had been a crowd, had been a preacher, had been a service. John the Baptist is silent.

But that's not the part I'm talking about when I say, that you may find it hard to believe. It was not his arrest. It's what happens after he was in prison. That's what difficult to believe.

When John was in prison, Matthew tells us, he heard about the ministry of Jesus, what Jesus was saying & doing. And so John called some of his followers to him in the prison & sent a message to Jesus and said to them, "And I want you to wait for an answer."

Now the message sent by John to Jesus was this, "Are you the Christ? Are you the Messiah? Are you the one we are looking for? Are you he or should we wait for someone else?"

Can you believe that? This towering powerful preacher now asking "Are you really the...? What about all those sermons he preached? Dozens & dozens of sermons, pointing to this one, stronger than I, standing at the door, about to come, get ready. And now he says, "Are you really?" Has he forgotten his own preaching? Has he forgotten what happened at the

baptism of Jesus? When Jesus came to John to be baptized John said to Jesus, “Oh, no, no, no. You should be baptizing me, I shouldn’t be baptizing you.” Has John forgotten that? Has John forgotten what God said at the baptism of Jesus, when Jesus came up out of the water? And the voice from heaven said, “This is my son.” John you were there, what do you mean, are you he? My goodness. You talk about being plunged into doubt and confusion, this is almost unbelievable.

Now you ordinarily of course expect there to be some let down between a high moment and then what follows. There is a world of difference between saying “a Messiah will come” and saying “the Messiah has already come.” It’s a marvelous message to receive to say, “a Messiah is coming.” Because everybody wants to believe a Messiah will come. But it’s a different thing when you say a Messiah has come. When you say, “a Messiah will come you can shape the Messiah into any form you want and have him do anything you want to make life perfect for you. But to say the Messiah has come is to get an assignment as to how we are to live, and that’s not quite as welcome.

I think, really, this is why some people prefer the second coming to the first. The first gives us an assignment, the second coming is really going to make everything like we want it. However, I do know and you

know that between the expectation and the reality there falls a shadow. Its true for everybody, it's true even for children. A child with parents are going past a pet store & see the beautiful little puppy in the window.

“Can I have the puppy? I want a puppy. Everybody else has a puppy. I want a puppy.”

“Well I don't know. Who's going to...”

“I'll take care of it. I'll feed it. I'll take care of it. I'll clean up after it. I'll do it. It'll be my puppy. I'll do everything. “

Finally the parents give in. They take the puppy home. Oh, it's just so wonderful. But at the end of a week, Mother says, “Have you fed the puppy? Given water to the puppy? Cleaned up after the puppy?”

“Do I have to do all of it? It looks like I'm the only one in this family. Everybody else ought to help...”

“You said you wanted the puppy.” But between wanting the puppy and having the puppy falls the shadow. It's true of so many things.

Marvelous wedding full of flowers, long white flowing dress, starched collars, everybody trembling, scared & happy, & a lot of cake, beautiful friends, what a marvelous occasion. Couple of weeks later the same couple

in a house trailer out in the middle of a muddy field, the electricity hasn't been connected yet, is this the same? Nah, nah, no, no, the shadow.

It's true of a job. Someone decides I want to be a teacher. I can just see the upturned faces of children anxious to learn. I want to stand in front of the classroom and teach them & satisfy their appetite to know. And so she makes a teacher & when she gets the first job she might as well been running for deputy sheriff. Breaking up fights, policing the playground, dealing with irate parents coming in, "what did you do to my child? I'll call a lawyer." Is this what I had in mind when I wanted to be a teacher?

It's true even in the ministry. I imagined myself sharing the good news of God's grace, people leaning forward into it, loving the gospel and the life that it calls for, it never occurred to me, until years later, that I would have late night meetings listening to an argument over the water bill. I never dreamed that I would be meeting with some influential well established wealthy members of the church and of the board that we would not allow certain types to worship here. Can you believe it? It's hard to believe. That's not what I prepared for. Between the expectation and the reality falls the shadow.

But I have a feeling something more is at work here. Something different. Is John in prison saying, "Why me? I was preacher. I was faithful. I said what I was supposed to say. Now I'm in prison. Is this the way God rewards the servants of God?" Is that it? Maybe the darkness, maybe the dampness of the dungeon is beginning to get to him. I can imagine the lonely cold days & nights in that place. Maybe it's the prospect of death. He knows he's going to die. He has no chance of being released. It's just a matter of what day will it be. I'm sure he rolls it over in his mind. Will I break down in tears & begin to cry when the executioner comes? Will I screw my courage to the sticking point & walk out clear-eyed level-gazed, embrace the ax. I'm sure he's thought about it.

Something is getting to John. He has sunk into doubt. He has been punished into confusion. Are you he or should we look for another? Well I read the text again & it occurred to me what has really has plunged John into doubt is this. When he heard what Jesus was saying, when he heard what Jesus was doing, he said, "Are you really the Messiah?"

You see here was a man who had preached that there is one coming full of wind and fire the man of God stronger than iron a judge in our midst. And here comes Jesus and there is no wind, and there is no fire. In the very next chapter of Matthew's gospel, he describes using the words of

Isaiah, he describes the ministry of Jesus. He doesn't hassle anybody, you don't hear him yelling in the street, he has such a tender care that nothing be lost that he would not break or bruise a reed, he would not smother a smoking wick, he is so gentle. Where is the wind? Where is the fire? This is not what John expected.

What did he expect? What did he want Jesus to say? When Jesus disciples wanted him to call down fire on a community that did not believe in Jesus & would not even listen to him or welcome him, the disciples said, "Call down fire from heaven and burn them up."

What did you expect Jesus to say, John? Let them burn? He said, "No let's go on to another town. Leave them alone."

When somebody hits you on one cheek, do you expect Jesus to say, "hit him back?"

When somebody calls you a foul name, says things about you that are not true, what do you do? Do you expect Jesus to say, "Retaliate. Eye for eye." No, no. "Do good to those who hate you. Speak good of those who mistreat you. Love your enemy."

When you're at the altar & remember somebody who has something against you. What do you expect Jesus to say? "Well that's their problem if

they have something against me. Not my problem.” He said, “No, no, no it is. You go make it right.”

What did you expect Jesus to say when they brought him the woman taken in adultery. We’re not talking about rumor here. She was taken in adultery it was clear. What do you expect him to say? “Now you’re going to pay. The full extent of the law. Mandatory sentence.”

He said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go & sin no more.”

Is that disappointing?

When the lepers called out & said, “Help us Messiah. Please help us.” And he went over and touched the lepers, does that disappoint you?

When he was put on the cross & looked from the cross upon those who crucified him what did you want him to say? “You’re going to burn for this. You’re going to get yours for this. What goes around comes around.”

He said, “Father forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.” Is that disappointing?

I hate to admit it but I know, I know, Jesus is a disappointment to some people. Here he came & he had his chance to use the power of

heaven, to teach them a lesson, put them in their place, and show them what's right & what's wrong & punish the wicked.

And here he is, and sends back to John in prison this answer, Ted read it to us a moment ago, the crippled are walking, the blind are seeing, the deaf are hearing, the dead are raised, the lepers are cleansed, and the poor people hear good news. Tell that to John.”

Is that disappointing to any of you? I never want this church to disappoint anybody but I know we will disappoint some. That's why we will have people come one time and never come back. Because some of them expect to hear the fire words of judgment, rejecting some folks, putting others in their place, turning others out, making moral police work our primary job here, and they won't hear it and they won't see it, & they'll go away disappointed. I know that's true.

I read recently something, I knew this but I had forgotten about it. That our ancestors years ago used to go out walking usually on a Sunday afternoon' sometimes alone, sometimes couples, sometimes whole families, go out walking on a Sunday afternoon, and they called it, "going marveling. Marveling." And they would look for unusual rocks, unusual wild flowers, shells, four-leaf clovers, marvelous things. And they would collect

them and bring them back to the house. And show off the marvelous things they had found. Isn't that a delightful thing, to go marveling? When I read that, I decided to go marveling myself. You know I live next door and from there you can walk right up to Byrd Park, and I came upon a pavilion, and I saw a lot of people, singing praying reading scripture sharing their love for each other. They were vowing they would, they promised to each other, they promised to God, that they would make every effort God help them, to reproduce the life of Jesus in this place. And I marveled. I marveled. And I said to myself, "look what I have found, right here in this little town." Amen.