

Advent III Year A

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

We hear this passage every three years in the lectionary cycle, and it always unsettles me. We find John the Baptist in Herod Antipas’ prison. (Now a brief excursus here...John the Baptizer got far more historical press than Jesus...Josephus the Jewish historian of the first century writes a lot about John’s ministry, but scarcely mentions Jesus. Some scholars suggest that after John’s death, Jesus and the Jesus movement picked up steam, and that this peculiar passage at the end of our Gospel reading for today about the greatness of John was Matthew’s attempt to do a little proselytizing...but I digress), I don’t know if my dis-ease is because the great John the Baptist, a patriarch of the faith, is having second thoughts...here we have John the Baptist who just a few chapters before proclaimed Jesus the Christ compared to whom he was unworthy...and now we find him in prison having doubts.... Are you really the one, he asks? That bothers me...because in the spiritual life we are not supposed to have doubts, right? If you believe that you need to come see me.

Or maybe, and perhaps more likely, I’m disturbed in this passage because of the image of prison...that incredible margin of life out of our sight, tucked away from civilization, wrapped in barbed wire and hidden behind the pines...maybe its because I’m claustrophobic...I’ve always been, but I’ve now matured deeper into that neurosis...I don’t even like elevators...and the thought of a dark prison cell just makes my palms sweat...Here is John, almost despairing, knowing that his days are numbered... wanting to know if his life’s work...His pointing the way of the coming of the Anointed One to save Israel...that for which he was born ...Was it all a mistake? There’s some serious pastoral care going on in this passage for the community of Matthew, a church community probably situated in Antioch in the late first century of the common era...some serious pastoral care here to a community with doubts...grave doubts...This was a dangerous time in the Imperial occupation...ethnic uprisings and the requisite crackdowns were common fare...and the young church was vulnerable...and the doubts about this promised way of salvation and dignity surely abounded... speaking the truth and enacting the truth will get you in trouble with the powers that be...in all four of the Gospels the disciples are warned of this grave danger....and Matthew musters his pastoral pen....and in the words of Jesus....he says in the midst of danger and doubt.... just look and see, pay attention....God’s admonition to Job, the same...just look and

see...yes this life is dangerous and uncertain...but just look and see...people are being healed...the deaf hear...the lame walk...the diseased cleansed... the poor are given the good news that they too have dignity...those considered the dead of our world are raised up...when the world is in winter, spring is not far behind...all doubts notwithstanding.... Matthew is saying that these are no small things...that these resurrection events are the only thing.

Paul Tillich in the early nineteen fifties coined the theological notion that without doubt there is no faith...when I read that in college in Religion 111 I almost fell to my knees in gratitude...In our religious culture in the west and in the religious cultures colonized by the west...there is an obsessive compulsion to exile doubt from sight, exile doubt from consciousness...just believe these thirty nine things and you've got it...just learn the program...memorize the owner's manual, and certainty is yours.... Certainty...isn't that what religion offers? I'm here to give you some news, there is nothing certain about the life of faith...Nothing certain about belief...The life of faith is about risk and uncertainty...because that is the way the world is...risk and uncertainty pulling at the seams of the status quo... mysteriously and quite paradoxically enabling change and transformation...enabling the advent of love...love entering at the pulled seams...love born from that which imprisons us...The baptizer is expressing, as persona, in Matthew's narrative drama, the doubts of the community...and Jesus tells him/them/us...that your work, our work, the work of faith, is never in vain...an ironic certainty...that the practice of the faith brings God's world to bear...just look and see; the kingdom comes as we speak...those on the margins raised up...the least of us...the unclaimed...the cast aside are being raised to dignity....and that is the benchmark...that the plumb line...that the vision, the heart of our faith....It is not enough to say I believe in Jesus...we have to be on the way of Jesus....and to get on this way we have to look towards the unseen...to where the lost are.... we must look to the peripheries to see God's coming.

The same for us here at All Saints Church...when we have doubts about the way we're on... Ask the question...What do we see? Homeless families welcomed here....people fed... meaningful and ongoing conversation about race.... Refugee families welcomed to a new home in spite of our disorienting frenzied western culture....We are advocates of dignity here for the disadvantaged in our community and our state...freed prisoners fighting the hard road back into society, from the claustrophobic margins welcomed home here and enabled into freedom.... Our funding of help agencies in our city...this isn't just outreach dear people of God...these

are signs of the coming kingdom...so let's start owning our work in and outside these doors; let's call it what it is...in every act of sacrifice, every act of love the kingdom, God's mutual and peaceable commonweal begins in earnest...our work is no less...no less.

A good part of our work is reading the signs, paying attention... keeping awake, as Matthew puts it...and then ours is to become the signs themselves of the coming of God...in reading the signs we become the signs....all doubts notwithstanding....the signs mark the way of Christ...the venerable practice of the good...as ancient as Torah in Sinai....as the Bhagavad-Gita ...as the Tao...the high ethic of the Kuran....these signs, goodness in practice, mark the incarnation of the sacred way of bearing mercy, kindness....the sacred way of bearing justice and compassion... speaking the words of peace...inclusion and embrace....and Matthew warns us that to not live this way is deathly...not just for us but for our sister...our brother...the practice of the good is the hallmark of every world religion.... and therefore in our practice we are all brothers and sisters....and it is high time that we as an increasingly global community claim that....there is no more waiting for the one who is to come...we, and by We I mean all people of conscience in every religion, every nation...people who practice the good for the sake of their neighbor...the great We are the ones to come into the world bearing God's gracious favor...fashioning the world as God would have it...Practice of the faith makes perfect the creation, as it were.

In an age of fear and doubt...what is it that we see....Let it be that our eyes are set free from the dark of whatever imprisons us...let it be that we see ourselves, a people restored....a courageous people reaching out to a world oppressed and shamed, and torn by violence...we just have to look and see...and live into the joyous uncertainty of faith that will certainly change the world....and we will find our true selves...our true calling... what we are made for....we will find on this way of the Christ that we are the ones to come...and no need to wait for another.