

## **OR SHALL WE LOOK FOR ANOTHER?**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

December 16, 2007

Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Luke Timothy Johnson, a New Testament scholar who teaches at Emory University tells the story of taking his daughter to the Lenox Square Mall in Atlanta to do some Christmas shopping in the height of the season. While standing in the mall he recalls a feeling that washed over him of needing to escape the mad crush of people spending money and carrying shopping bags from one store to another.

Standing in the midst of the frenzy of humanity coming and going he thought, “There is nothing in this place that anybody needs, and there is nothing that anybody needs that is in this place.”

Which leads me to ask, what are you really looking for this Christmas? What is it that you are hoping to receive? Is it something money can buy? Or is it something not all the money in the world could get you? I ask that question because what you’re looking for often determines what you see.

I think I have told the story before that many years ago I bought a travel package to London, my first trip overseas since graduating from college. I was not a seasoned traveler when I was in my twenties, so I bought one of those London show tour packages with the hotel and West End plays included. Part of the deal was that the tour company provided transportation from the airport to the hotel upon arrival.

When I got through customs at Heathrow, and worked my way into the *Arrivals* section there was a large crowd waiting for people including many drivers holding cards to identify themselves. I kept looking for a sign somewhere with the name of my tour company. But after looking for awhile in vain, I gave up and took a taxi from the airport to my hotel.

When I got settled into my room, the phone rang and a friendly voice on the other end greeted me. It was the representative of the tour company wanting to know if everything was all right. I said, yes, but that no one was at the airport to meet me. “Well, actually that was why I was calling Mr. Walton,” said the voice on the other end. “We had a man there to meet you but he said you never came.”

I explained that I had been at the airport, came through customs, but no one was waiting there holding a card with the name of the tour company on it. So I gave up and took a taxi into town. “Oh I am sorry,” said the voice on the other end, “the sign the driver was holding said, ‘Walton.’”

What you are looking for often determines what you see.

John the Baptist knew this. Last week we left him at the Jordan announcing that we must, “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” His wild look, his leather loincloth, his locust appetizers, and his penchant for baptism by total immersion had garnered a crowd. They came from all the region around the Jordan, from Jerusalem and Judea, and even a cousin of his, a carpenter from Galilee came to hear his message and to receive his baptism.

But what a difference a day makes, or a week, better said. In the short span from last week to this, our story moves from John's call for repentance and personal reflection to a skeptical questioning borne of disappointment and doubt. A couple of years have passed, perhaps, and the scene has shifted from the wide open spaces of the region around the Jordan to the confines of a dark and dank cell where John has been imprisoned by Herod. It will not be long before John will be decapitated and his head served up as a party favor for Salome having performed the dance of the seven veils for Herod.

John, knowing that his days were numbered, sent word from prison via his own disciples, a simple question requiring only a yes or no answer from Jesus. "Are you he who is to come," John asked, "or shall we look for another?" It was a fair question given John's disillusionment and precarious situation. After all, he was the one who had baptized Jesus. He was the one who had preached a gospel of repentance. He was the one who prepared the way of the Lord, so that Jesus might walk onto a stage in history set for his appearance.

But John was disappointed by what he had seen. There were questions in his mind about the authenticity of Jesus' messianic authority. John had been scandalized by Jesus. In comparison with the Twelve, John's followers, like him, had led an ascetic life, observing the law scrupulously.

Jesus on the other hand, was a party boy, known to play fast and loose with the requirements of the law. There were rumors that Jesus' disciples had plucked grain in the fields on the Sabbath. That Jesus had made friends among those despised Samaritans. There were rumors that he was speaking of God in very familiar terms, calling him "Abba," "Daddy." Why no faithful Jew would even speak God's name.

His disciples were known as wine drinkers and party goers, while John's disciples never touched the stuff. And then there were those other murmurings, the ones about the prostitutes; the short skirts, the scooping necklines, the makeup and lipstick and fishnet stockings. Jesus not only spent time with them, he also broke bread with them. Everybody knows, bad company ruins good morals!

When you have spent your life, even to the point of going to prison for your religious convictions, it's disillusioning when someone new comes along and witnesses to God in a new and different way. "Are you the one who is to come," John asked, "or shall we look for another?"

One of the things we tend to forget is that there is abundant skepticism in the Bible. Its nagging presence at so many turns confirms that doubt is the refining fire in which the sword of faith is hammered.

The Christmas story itself is fraught with doubt. Zechariah, John the Baptist's father is so skeptical of the good news of his wife's post-menopausal pregnancy that he is struck speechless for his disbelief.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, when the angel tells her that she is expecting, initially questions, "How can this be?" And when Joseph hears of Mary's pregnancy, he wants to put Mary away quietly, knowing that if she has not been intimate with him ...well ...who?

Thomas doubts the resurrection and claims that unless he can touch the imprint of the nails and see the holes in Jesus' feet, he will not believe. And on Easter morning the

apostles who have been closest to Jesus hear the account of the women who have been to the empty tomb and dismiss it as an idle tale.

Why even Mother Theresa, it was revealed this past summer, though on the fast track to sainthood, struggled mightily with doubt. In more than forty letters she described her doubts and spoke of the “dryness,” “darkness,” “loneliness,” and “torture” that she was undergoing. At one point she said it had driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God. “The smile,” she writes, is “a mask,” “a cloak that covers everything.”<sup>1</sup>

Some people were outraged that her letters were published, that she would be shown to be so human. But I am thankful that these letters have been made public. It shows me that my own doubts and fears, my dryness and darkness of faith have a place alongside my trust and confidence in God as well.

Who of us has not struggled with doubt when God was not doing things our way, or answering our most earnest prayers in the manner we had indicated? I go to the hospital, and the most frequently asked spiritual question is, “Why me?” As if illness was a matter of deserving or moral character.

And beyond ourselves, we look at the world and despair at times that God is looking away. The terrorist attacks, the car bombs, the assassinations and violence. All the loss of life... these young service people we name each week in the prayers, the children playing in the street torn to shreds by IED's, people just trying to go on with life but who cannot because of the violence. What sense do we make of it, and where is God while all of this is going on? Is heaven finally silent? Or is the song of the angels sung to the shepherds of peace on earth good will to all nothing more than visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads?

Jesus answers John's doubt in an interesting way. “Tell John,” Jesus says, “that 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 hears John's disappointment but urges John to look at the world in a new way, to look, as someone has suggested, “with eschatological eyes.”<sup>2</sup> Don't put on rose colored glasses, put on glasses that sharpen the vision, that see farther than the present moment, that bring into focus that larger project that Jesus has taken on. Look past what is broken, charred, and disappointing and catch a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven that is on its way and that is evident from time to time, so quickly. That's what Jesus is asking John to do.

So many of you are young parents, and you know your kids have good days and bad days. Some days you just want to throw in the towel, turn in the kids and get a refund. But on the days when they are at their worst; cranky, obstinate, angry, whining, nothing you do is right, they dig in their heels, they drive you crazy, what keeps you going? It's that larger vision, that greater hope, that deep seated conviction that in time this is going to pass, it's going to work out, and you and they will be all right.

It's the belief that steady parenting, hanging in through the bad days and the rough patches, is going to equip them to be responsible adults some day. It's that longer vision and greater hope that keeps you going. In a way, it's far-sightedness, eschatological eyesight, the eyes that look with hope for that which is not fulfilled

completely, but that we glimpse from afar every now and then. That's the eyesight that Jesus challenged John to use.

If all we had to hang onto were this present moment, its disappointments and problems, this close up sighting of the way things are, we could easily be discouraged. But that longer view may be enough to sustain you.

Even in the church it seems sometimes as if the problems that divide us as a denomination, the struggles we have within as Presbyterians, may overwhelm us. There are always folks in the church who say, let's just have peace. No more squabbling. If we keep fussing over these ordination issues we're going to lose all our members! We may not be as bad off as the Episcopalians, bless their hearts, but let me tell you as I travel around the country and work among churches where not everyone is welcome, and gay and lesbian members are driven away, it can be discouraging, trying to fight for justice while also maintaining unity in the church.

My friend Ted Wardlaw, President of Austin Theological Seminary, in an article I read recently remembers that,

A few years ago people in the Presbyterian Church pulled out their calculators and assessed [our membership losses] from a certain angle and went public with a startling prediction. Influenced by all the literature about the decline of the mainline church, they predicted that if present trends continued, Presbyterians would be virtually non-existent sometime in the twenty-first century.

They put this prediction in a particularly clever way. They said that if present trends continued Presbyterians would become the Amish of the twenty-first century. It was a way of saying that for all practical purposes, Presbyterians would be marginalized and irrelevant, as if we were horse and buggy people – totally out of date and rendered invisible by our irrelevance in a world that had totally eclipsed us. ...the Amish of the twenty first century – people laughed at that thought so cleverly put.

Then in the fall of 2006, we all watched as one particular Amish community in Pennsylvania – in the midst of grieving and burying a group of their own schoolchildren who had been slaughtered by a rage filled man with a gun that he finally turned on himself – paused nonetheless to send a delegation to reach out to and financially support the widow and family of the one who had done the slaughtering. We watched in open mouthed disbelief as they summoned a strength that ultimately was impossible, humanly speaking, and then dealt with the sin and tragedy that had penetrated their world by beholding it with the right kind of eyesight. We watched in complete awe as they directed our gaze, if we had the eyesight ourselves to see it, toward a light shining in the darkness that the darkness – try as it might – could not overcome.

And speaking for myself, I would be pleased for any church in the twenty first century to be compared to that witness. I would praise God if our church, too, could be compared favorably with people who see the

world – dark and threatening and incomplete and full of terror as it often is  
– with that kind of eyesight.<sup>3</sup>

I have sometimes wondered what might have happened in the light of what occurred in our city on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, if rather than rush to war with Afghanistan and Iraq, we, as a nation, had instead declared an initiative to undermine terror, by building bridges with peaceful Muslim nations, helping with schools in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran, providing more aid in the form of food and medical assistance and housing improvement and community development. Nurturing Middle Eastern cooperation with the Saudis and others developing a Middle Eastern Commonwealth where all that oil money might have been used to better the lives of the poor. What if we had undermined the very foundations of Al Qaeda by working for a peaceful resolution of disagreements in Israel and Palestine and throughout the region instead of ignoring them for so long?

What if we had worked harder to free ourselves from the addiction to oil that we have still not addressed? What if we Christian clergy across denominations had done more to invite Sunni and Shiite Muslim conversations on bridging religious and theological differences within the same faith; and what might we learn from each other?

Would the world be as dark and foreboding today, if six years ago we had reassessed how to make the world safer for all of its people, and then addressed the root causes of terrorism in the world that erupted on 9/11, with hopeful, positive, respectful efforts, instead of promising to bomb Afghanistan back to the stone age, and demonstrate Shock and Awe in Iraq? Wouldn't the billions and billions we have spent on war and homeland security have been better used in efforts to build peace and create global security if we really wanted to do something for the security of our children and grandchildren?

Sometimes our vision is so shortsighted that we only see imperfectly what is right in front of us, and thereby miss the vision of that farther destination where God is leading us.

It's only nine days till Christmas now. And over the next week, our world will be a little frantic running here and there, as people madly shop for yet one more gift for someone who already has everything. We'll party and eat and drink and make merry and knock ourselves out doing it.

But I want to invite you to do something else as well. Do not fail to keep your eyes trained on the longer vision, the greater hope, the deeper need that we are all longing to see fulfilled, when One arrives among us who will restore sight to the blind, and make the lame to dance, give life to the dying, and bring good news to the poor. And won't he be a sight for sore eyes when he comes?

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<sup>1</sup> Mother Theresa: Come Be My Light. (New York: Doubleday, 2007) as quoted in "Mother Theresa's Crisis of Faith," David Van Biema, Time Magazine, August 23, 2007

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<sup>2</sup> Theodore J. Wardlaw, *Journal for Preachers*, Vol XXXI, Number 1, Advent 2007, (Decatur, Ga: Journal for Preachers, 2007) p. 6

<sup>3</sup> Wardlaw, *Ibid.*, p. 7.