

## AS ONE UNKNOWN

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

December 14, 2008

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11;

John 1:6-8, 19-28

In his book **Blink**, Malcolm Gladwell points out that until very recently, classical music was the preserve of white men, an unfortunate phrase I have come to dread more and more in recent years. The common bias in the music world was that women “simply could not play like men. They didn’t have the strength, the attitude, or the resilience for certain kinds of pieces. The argument was their lips were different. Their lungs were less powerful. Their hands were smaller. That didn’t seem like a prejudice. It seemed like a fact, because when conductors and music directors held auditions, the men always seemed to sound better than women.”

Auditions were often casual affairs, sometimes held in the conductor’s dressing room or hotel room if he were passing through town. Performers played for five minutes or two minutes or ten minutes – it didn’t really matter, it was believed, because music was music. An expert should be able to listen to music played in any circumstance and “gauge, instantly and objectively, the quality of a performance.”

Then the unions came along and auditions became carefully regulated events. Hiring decisions were made by audition committees, not just the conductor. Musicians were identified by number rather than by name. Screens were erected between the judges and the musician, so the judges could not see the person auditioning.

It was because of this change that Abbie Conant was able to begin her career as a trombonist 30 years ago. She had applied at eleven openings for various orchestras throughout Europe, and received only one invitation to audition, from the Munich Philharmonic. “Dear Herr Abbie Conant,” the letter began.

There were thirty-three candidates for the position, and each auditioned behind a screen. Abbie was number seventeen. During the audition she cracked a note in a difficult piece and thought that she had lost the job. She went backstage to start packing up her belongings to go home.

But the judges thought otherwise. They loved her performance. The conductor cried out, “That’s who we want!” and the remaining sixteen players waiting to audition were sent home. Someone went to get Abbie and when she stepped out from behind the screen, the judges were stunned. They were expecting Herr Abbie Conant, but this was Frau Abbie Conant.<sup>1</sup>

All of which goes to prove that what you expect may not always be what you discover, and if you have expected the wrong thing altogether, you may be quite surprised when what you were looking for comes.

This is an important truth to underscore in the season of Advent, the season of expectation now in its third week as we move inexorably toward the arrival of Christmas and the coming of the One heralded by the angels and foretold by the prophets. What you expect largely determines what you will see.

John the Baptist whose job is to help us adjust our expectations has already stepped onto the stage for a cameo appearance last week. But this time he looks somewhat different than he did when we last saw him. John, the gospel writer, includes none of the color commentary about the Baptist that Mark and Matthew cite. No leather loincloth, no vegan diet. Maybe a two day stubble, so popular now, but not the wild beard and caveman appearance that the other gospels imply. John the Baptist in the fourth gospel is a more reasoned and reflective prophet than we might expect.

And his word is that he is not the Light, but that he bears witness to the Light. He is not the messiah, he is prophet to the messiah. He is not the One who is to come, that one is yet to come. "I baptize with water," John says, "But among you stands one whom you do not know," one who is coming after me. He is the one you are awaiting.

In some of the most famous paintings of John the Baptist he is pointing away from himself, to Jesus. In the memorable Eisenheim Altarpiece "Christ on the Cross," for instance, Mathias Grünewald depicts the scene at Golgotha. Jesus is on the cross, Mary is on his left beneath, swooning in the arms of the Beloved Disciple, and John the Baptist is on the right, remarkably so, because by the time Jesus is crucified, John has been beheaded, but artists do as they will, we all know, but I digress. John's bony finger is extended pointing to Jesus, as if to say, "this is the Light that has come into the world."

On the one hand, I suppose it is completely understandable that John would say what he does, "Among you stands one whom you do not know." Not everyone *got* him. The scribes and Pharisees viewed him as a rabble rouser, a rube from the backwater region of the Galilee with no credentials, no training, no claim to authority save that the crowds went after him like a rock star. Who would have thought him capable of greatness in any sense?

The Romans took no notice of him, except that he drew large crowds which were a nuisance and a worry. The leaders of the Temple resented him, pointing to his blasphemous comments, jealous of the way in which the people were attracted to him and not to them.

He might have gotten by with just that much, never really created such a stir as to precipitate what happened, were it not for that day in the Temple, that day he upset the apple carts, quite literally, disturbing the peace. It was then that the Roman authorities as well as the Temple leadership realized they had to do away with him. Anyone stirring up the people like that was no friend of theirs.

The only non-Biblical and secular historian who makes any reference to Jesus at all, Josephus, speaks more of his followers than of him directly and not in a positive vein, but that they are the object of Roman discipline, an unruly group following after one *Crestus*, whom they thought to be the messiah.

"Among you stands one whom you do not know," John said, and perhaps as a figure not yet having been fully revealed prior to the resurrection, in Jesus own time those who did not take note of him had good excuses for not recognizing him for what he was; he was, after all neither a king in any earthly way, nor a military leader, nor anything else the messiah was to be.

And if that was true, so was this... they were too busy, too preoccupied, too worried about just surviving to notice him, too tired to notice that the earth was shifting under their feet. All they were trying to do, after all, was to make a living, unsure whether they might have a job the next day, worried about losing home or having to live with parents, or whether their children had enough to eat or were being bullied at school, or what they might do if their health caved in. He looked to them like a carpenter, not a rabbi or prophet, or messiah, whatever messiahs look like. Maybe they saw him as a good man, a fascinating personality, a miracle worker of which there were many. But did they see anything uniquely divine? Well that was pushing it.

Maybe the last thing on the mind of many of them was looking or waiting for a messiah at all. Maybe all they could do was live for the day. Keep body and soul together and try not to worry about the rest. We all know what that's like.

"Among you stands one whom you do not know," John said. And it was true. They didn't know him when he came. That was the problem then.

And today I suspect the tables are reversed and the reason we don't recognize him is that we know him all too well. We do know who he is, don't we? We all at least know who he became.

Just about everybody's heard of Jesus haven't they? The internet, the mega church, the dissemination of printed materials and tracts smuggled into Russia and China and Iran, for heaven's sake; the countless religious crusades launched by evangelists through the years all over the earth, the foreign missions of Pentecostal and Protestant and Catholic ministries, the translation of the Bible into countless languages; they have all told us precisely who Jesus was and is and what we might expect of him.

He is the man of Galilee. White flowing seamless robe, neatly trimmed beard, sandals, six feet tall, Middle Eastern appearance bordering on North American, kindly, good with old people and children. Inspiring motivational speaker. World class ethics. Right up there with Gandhi and Mother Theresa and more.

And if the world knows him in that way, how much more do we have him locked down in terms of what we are looking for as our *Advent* hope. The messiah who comes at the end of these shopping days before Christmas?

We know very well who he is. He is the child in the manger, the helpless baby of a blessed birth whose parents are taken by surprise at the first news of his impending arrival, they who are poor and imposed upon and must travel to Bethlehem to enroll for a taxation census. His mother is in the late stages of pregnancy when they arrive in Judea, and she is forced to use as a maternity suite the back end of a cow's stall where she lays the newborn child in the rough straw of a manger trough.

We know the details of that night down to the placement of every figure in our home crèches. The shepherds abiding in the fields, the night journey that takes them into Bethlehem, and the angelic chorus. The Wise Men who come with gifts and kneel before the child who will be a king. The silent night, holy night of his birth with star in the East above the Inn at the end of the world. And we know the flight into Egypt after his birth where the Holy Family takes refuge until the death of Herod.

We know all about this. We have sung it for years, the First Noel, Silent Night, Angels We Have Heard on High. We get all misty about the church on Christmas Eve, and the glow of the candles and the choir singing, and the trees lit up, and the beauty of the sanctuary on that special night. We love it. And we've been there many times, so we know who's coming. Jesus is coming the child of Bethlehem, and Santa Claus is coming too even if that doesn't have anything to do with Jesus.

We know who stands at the end of these days of Advent preparation. So can we really say with any understanding that we believe what John the Baptist is saying when he says, "One stands among you whom you do not know?"

John's words are as much cautionary as they are descriptive. He is after all a prophet making way for one who will come after him whom we least expect.

Jesus never ceased to amaze those who knew him. His friends and family thought they knew him. But one day he left home, something no obedient son in a Middle Eastern family of his time might ever do, abandoning his mother and father, and his brother James, to live a life on the road, moving to Capernaum, taking as friends an insider group of disciples whom he would commission to teach and preach, an unlikely lot of uneducated men, and tax collectors and fisher folk.

He went to his hometown of Nazareth and taught in the synagogue, and while at first they liked what he said, when he told them that the scriptures were fulfilled in him, they were enraged and accused him of blasphemy and ran him out of town, his own hometown.

Near the end of his life he went to the temple in Jerusalem and didn't like what he saw. He made a whip of cords, and overturned the tables, and drove out the money changers. And when challenged by the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day, he outwitted and out-thought them all, leaving them scratching their heads and plotting against him.

Even his disciples never quite fully understood what he was about. It was only after he had given up his life on a cross, surrendering all that he was to God's eternal care and design that they understood in his resurrection the vindication of what he had been saying all along.

We like to keep him a helpless child lying in a manger, with that endearing story of heavenly choruses in our minds, and shepherds adoring, and friendly beasts keeping watch on the Holy Family.

It's easy to love *that* Jesus. Much harder to get close to the Jesus who unmask all the idolatries of our lives, who exposes our half truths and moral compromises, who throws over the tables of our accommodation, who knows the promises we have not kept, and calls us to an impossible level of ethical accountability and selfless love, to a forgiveness of others for transgressions against us that we have nursed like a fine wine after dinner by fireside on a cold and wintry night.

John the Baptist warns us not to get too comfortable in the stable, warming ourselves in the glow of the lantern as it lights the family adoring the child. For this boy is destined for a life that will be so good, so deep, so rich, so upsetting, and so unexpected that it will throw a glaring light on all our living, as he out-lives and out-loves us all.

It's John's voice that shakes us out of our reverie, and reminds us that the story of Christmas is not the story of once upon a time long ago, in a place far away, and an age not like our own... but that into a world such as ours a child was born, who grew to adulthood, and showed us on a cross the breadth and height and depth of God's love.

Among you stands one whom you do not know, John the Baptist said. And we are still struggling to know him, to figure out who he was, who he is.

Ironically, I think the world is more alive with God, more incarnate with God than we realize, that God is among us in ways that we do not see because we are not looking for the right thing or in the right places.

Paul Gerhardt Trost is a young, contemporary artist whose inspiration comes from both spiritual and secular sources. He has traveled among Mayan communities in Central America where he has been moved by the courage of indigenous, peasant people, especially children. It shows in his work, which often depicts hauntingly gaunt and ghostlike figures, who bear the forms of suffering and anguish, ribs prominent, they are the poor and malnourished frames that belie the stories of people who have too little in a world of too much.

In one particular painting, two men are depicted, skeletal in appearance, wasted like people from Darfur, or victims of untreated AIDS. Neither of the two has much strength, but the one cradles the head of the other raised so that from his reclining position he can drink from a small bowl. It is a simple act of kindness, as both men are clearly suffering together. The title of this oil on wood painting is *Blessed are the Merciful*. There was something about it that caught my eye from the beginning. Something I wasn't quite sure I could name, because there in the picture was one I knew, but did not know. And I am still wondering, having studied it closely, which of the two is Jesus and which one is you (or is that me?).

"Among you stands one whom you do not know," John said. And it is precisely him we await in these latter days of Advent, the one who is most like us whom we least expect.

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<sup>1</sup> I have quoted not only from Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little Brown, 2005) 244-250, but also from Leanne Pearce Reed's paper presented at the 2008 Moveable Feast, a paper based on the John lectionary text, unpublished..