

“What About Us Prisoners?”

Matthew 11:2-11

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Preached December 16, 2007 at San José, Costa Rica

Modest, isn't he, this Jesus? Modest to a fault. Oh yes, the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleaned, the deaf have their ears opened, the poor hear the good news, even the dead are raised, but it is all in a day's work, eh? I suppose it wouldn't have done him any good to say to John's disciples or anyone else for that matter, "Of course, I'm the Messiah! Who else do you think could have done all these things?" Either you're going to believe it or not, right? So he simply tells them, go tell your boss what you hear and see. This Jesus just won't take all the credit for the miraculous. Part of the reason for failing to do so is that although in the big picture he is responsible for these truly awesome things, he hasn't done alone what John has heard about. In the chapters just prior to this one, we see Jesus equipping and sending out his disciple to do these things that John the Baptist's disciples are supposed to report on. Jesus has shared his divine power and now others have the responsibility for the deeds of power, compassion, mercy, and hope that characterize this Kingdom. Jesus' brand of modesty is the lesson that we need to learn over and over again: it's a we thing, not a me thing.

Not that John saw any of this firsthand, having been arrested by King Herod for meddling in the King's personal life, but he's heard. And although he may like what he's heard, for what's not to like about healing and hope-bringing, it doesn't

sound exactly like what he expected, and even preached about, and perhaps personally hoped that the Messiah would do. His Messiah would dish out a little punishment, pour down some fire and brimstone, kick a few unrepentant backsides, and then things would be back to normal, you know, God in charge and Israel on top of the heap of nations. You remember him saying, “the ax is lying at the root of the tree? The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire?” That’s the take no prisoners Messiah John wants to know and love. You see, even though John the Baptist was God’s messenger, and Jesus’ announcer, and even though there was no one, in Jesus’ own words, “greater than he” born of a woman, he was still like pretty much everyone else, putting the cart before the horse thinking that might precedes mercy.

Even without speculating too much on John’s psychological condition after spending time in Herod’s jail, it’s hard not to see how his confinement didn’t exactly jive with his understanding of the presence of the Lord’s anointed. After all, one would have expected a true Messiah to have at least negotiated a prisoner exchange by now, if not conducted an outright jailbreak. But this Jesus guy has been strolling around the countryside healing people and talking to them and driving out demons instead of Romans. And so even though John is likely confused, he prefers not to jump to conclusions, and so he sends his disciples straight to the source. Are you the one or not? And if it weren’t enough that Jesus doesn’t fulfill his expectations, Jesus sends back the messengers with an

evidentiary list of great deeds in which the phrase John perhaps most longed to hear, “free the captives,” is conspicuously absent. Freeing the captives was, of course, an act of God which was frequently part of divine visions and prophecies. And so we might imagine John saying, “Oh, that’s rich. The lepers get theirs, but what about us prisoners?” and missing the very point of the freedom he so desperately needed.

There is, of course, a great irony in the exclusion of “free the captives” from the list, namely that John not only remained a physical prisoner until his death, but may have remained a spiritual one as well, held captive as much by his need for vengeance as by his ball and chain. It would be unfair to say that John lacked faith in God. Rather, it seems that his faith belonged to that era in which the defining attribute of God’s glory was the power to extract vengeance rather than practice compassion. The terms of victory were military not medical, strategic not spiritual. And so John’s spirit, like his body, probably remained locked up, held against its will by a vision of God that was even narrower than the bars of his cell. “Let anyone with ears listen,” Jesus says. It may be that this news brought light to John’s perspective on the Kingdom, and that one set of his chains was loosened, but we don’t get to hear that part of the story. We don’t know if John ever “got it.” What we do know, by listening in on this episode, is that our spirits can be free if we take a good, hard look at what Jesus is doing and go and do likewise. You see, if any one of us, any one of the least of us in the Kingdom, is “better” than John the

Baptist, it is because we have learned the lesson that vengeance is God's work done on God's schedule, and compassion, justice, and mercy are our work done with what little time we have.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that John's prophecy was wrong about the coming judgment, far from it. Indeed, Jesus himself speaks frequently about the coming time when God's judgment is visited on the unrepentant and the unrighteous, a judgment that will be as swift as it is horrible. But what distinguishes Jesus' vision of that time from John's is the hour of its coming, an hour we learned a couple of weeks ago is known only to God. Rather than trying to predict that hour, we are called to make sure we are unsurprised by its coming. Rather than try to catch lightning in a bottle, we are called to be the bottle, an act of patience as hard as they come. As hard as it may be to wait for God to exact God's justice and God's vengeance, for God to clean up all that has gone wrong in the world, indeed that is exactly what we are called to do. It's not a passive waiting, of course, any more than Jesus' time on earth was spent lounging in a hammock in Nazareth. It's an active and impatient waiting, a waiting during which, by God's power through us, the messengers of other impatient prophets might see and hear what John's messengers saw, that the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf have their ears opened, the lepers are cleaned, the poor hear the good news, and that even the dead are raised. That's when the prisoners are freed, that's when we are freed.

I thought about John's question, "what about us prisoners?" this week as I heard about the shootings that took place last Sunday in Colorado at a church and at a missionary training center. It would be too easy to say that the shooter was a prisoner of his own mind, or state of mental health. Rather, I think he was a prisoner of the same kind of impulse that seems as normal today as it did to those whose expectation of the Messiah met with frustration at his actual mission, the impulse to strike out at one's enemies rather than to love them. Clearly, the Colorado shooter had all sorts of emotional and psychological troubles which drove him to resolve his issues at the wrong end of a gun, but I wonder if a more impatient, John the Baptist-like approach to God didn't start him down the path to taking matters into his own hands violently.

I thought about John's question, "what about us prisoners?" as I spent some time with Keith and Joy Holder yesterday, hearing about some of the young people with whom they are working in some of San José's shantytowns. Like John the Baptist, many are doubly bound, both by the circumstances of their poverty and lack of opportunities, but also by the inability to see that the justice they seek is not theirs to extract. They are imprisoned by the belief that it will be acts of violence, rather than acts of compassion and mercy, which will free them. They are imprisoned by the belief that the power they do wield with their guns is stronger than the power they could wield with the gifts God has given them. And once

they wield the wrong kind of power, their captivity becomes complete and all too real. Then they swap one kind of imprisonment for another.

John the Baptist is right to ask, “What about us prisoners?,” even if he is talking about the wrong form of imprisonment. The liberty in Christ we claim for ourselves means little if others remain in chains, spiritual or otherwise, that could be broken if we followed in the footsteps of those disciples Jesus sent out into the world. If we want to spring the prisoners from their captivity, to get them on the list, so to speak, of the beneficiaries of God’s grace, we’ll have to practice some of the active, Advent patience evident in tonight’s passage, the kind our hearts, hands, and voice must do and be if the promises of God’s Kingdom are to be brought to flower.

A little while ago, we pledged ourselves to young Joshua Porras and his family, pledged ourselves to “guide and nurture him, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging him to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of his church.” Those are promises hard enough to fulfill even if we are more focused on mercy, compassion and justice than on vengeance. They are hard because they require us to be witnesses daily to the kind of hope that is sometimes so difficult to see in the midst of our daily routines. They are hard because vengeance is easier than mercy. They are hard because love is harder to practice than hate. How much harder are they to keep when our moments of despair grow and our resolve weakens, and our instinct to retreat or retaliate rises up inside of us

like the demons Jesus drove out? But friends, let us remember, and let take with us from this place, the same grace we celebrated in Joshua's baptism, a grace which will help us too to be delivered from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from sin to righteousness, and from despair to hope. What about us prisoners? The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Can I get an Amen?