

A Haiku Advent: Reboot  
Matthew 11:2-11  
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For those of you who may have missed the festivities the last two Sundays, we are coming to an end of our Haiku Advent. Next week, our young people will be sharing a drama with us during worship, so this will be the last sermon of Advent before Christmas Eve. As you may remember, or are just learning, this Advent we are taking as our point of departure the following haiku, written in the form of a hypothetical Microsoft computer error message:

Chaos reigns within  
Reflect, repent, and reboot  
Order shall return

The world is indeed a chaotic place, and so too are our own hearts, and yet Christ is sovereign over both, and order shall return. God does God's part and calls us to do our part. This Advent our part is to look at the human responses to chaos, reflect, repent, and reboot, as we await the return of order: the coming of Christ we will celebrate on Christmas Eve and at the end of the age.

Two weeks ago we looked at the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew to reflect some on the fact that Advent focuses us on not just the first coming of Christ in the manger, but the second coming as well. Last Sunday we listened to the challenging words of John the Baptist, calling us to repent, and to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Tonight we turn to the response of "reboot," and aiding us tonight is

the eleventh chapter of Matthew, in which we encounter John the Baptist in prison:

(Read Scripture)

So, what would a haiku based on Matthew 11 look like? Well, try this one on as perhaps a summary of the whole passage:

See these miracles?  
You were expecting maybe...?  
Least is greater still.

In my last church, a relatively small number of people consistently used email, and many people did not even own a computer, or were so computer illiterate that they may as well have not owned one. In that environment, a weekly electronic newsletter such as ECF's Emerge would have been a waste of time, and so to share information, we sent out a monthly paper newsletter, carefully prepared for mailing by a dedicated volunteer team of folders, staplers, and labelers, only about ten percent of whom, I am sure, used email! Here, however, we are very close, if we have not already achieved, one hundred percent participation in email, and almost that with Facebook, so much so, that even if there were a functioning postal system to send out a traditional paper newsletter, it wouldn't really make sense. The ubiquity of computers in our lives makes it possible for us then to co-opt their technical language and employ it for theological purposes. Such is the case with the word "reboot." Although John Calvin and Martin Luther would be scratching their heads upon hearing of our need to "reboot" this Advent season,

even before I say much more, almost all of you will already have a pretty good idea of what I mean. Or at least you will find out soon enough if you did.

Tonight's passage tells brings us the story of the encounter between Jesus and some of the disciples of John the Baptist, who, we learn, is languishing in Herod's prison. You might wonder why John the Baptist even had any disciples he could send to Jesus, since we just heard him announcing last week that he was not fit even to carry Jesus' sandals, but apparently, old loyalties die hard, and there were some who thought John's message was somehow superior to Jesus'. Some historians have discovered that even after John's death, there continued for some time to be those who followed his teachings, teachings which may be at the heart of his question to Jesus about the Messiah. You will remember that John was announcing the nearness of the Kingdom of heaven, and that people were responding, coming to him confessing their sins and being baptized. Jesus, too, comes to John for baptism, and then begins his ministry, which is described in the chapters preceding tonight's passage. For our purposes tonight, what you need to know about that description of the early days of Jesus' ministry is that it concludes with Jesus sending out the twelve disciples, right before tonight's episode with John the Baptist.

While Jesus is preparing the disciples, John, of course, has been arrested and thrown in prison for his criticism of King Herod. He is not without his sources, however, and so he learns about what is going on with Jesus and his disciples. And

sitting there in prison, we can imagine him wondering, “Um, where’s the army? Is twelve measly soldiers all he can muster? And he sends them out with nothing more than their good intentions, a message of hope, and permission to knock the dust off their sandals if they are not received gracefully? The Romans are going to eat them for lunch.” John was not alone, of course, in his expectations about the activities of God’s chosen one, and nor was he right, but we read the story expecting John to “get it,” perhaps because he is Jesus’ cousin and all. But maybe he just doesn’t get it. The text doesn’t make as clear as we might like the rationale for John’s question, “are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” and so we have to make an educated guess. My guess is that although John had the right idea of the change needed in the hearts and minds of God’s people, that attitude of humility and repentance expressed in baptism, he had the wrong idea of how to get rid of the enemy, the Romans, and those who conspired with the enemy, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who got tongue-lashed in last week’s lesson. For them, he has adopted the prevailing violent wisdom of his day, and expressed the vitriol and wrath reserved for outsiders and turncoats: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” You will remember that no such words of condemnation are offered by John to the ordinary folks who came to the River Jordan for baptism.

No, these words are used for the traitors, as if they were not among the candidates for redemption.

Our passage tonight begins with this bit of information: “When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing...” and we may presume that he had indeed heard of all the things Jesus tells John’s disciples to report back to him, about the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, the lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead being raised, and the poor having good news brought to them. Jesus is really not telling them anything they don’t already know. But as if to poke John a little, he adds on that bit about “And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me,” as if to say, “If all this isn’t good enough for you, and for your idea of the Messiah, well, there’s not much I can do about that; it’s all on you. But I am who I am. I will be who I will be. Deal with it.”

It seems clear that Jesus was not bringing the kind of judgment that John expected. This is why he asks whether Jesus is “the one.” It also seems clear that what John needed, and what Jesus gave him, was a reboot of his Messianic expectations, a message designed to get him to examine his understanding of Scripture, to question his ability to be surprised by God, to put all of his priorities back in the divine order they should have been in. Remember what rebooting your computer does: it goes back to the beginning and puts your computer’s file structure back into its original, best, and most efficient order, so that it runs smoothly again, and makes it possible for you to go on being the most productive

data enterer, graphic designer or Facebooker you can be. To be the best prophet he could be, to proclaim the message God wanted him to bring, John the Baptist needed a reboot. And he got one.

In the Microsoft world, when things start slowing down, and error messages start popping up, or when you get the blue screen of death, the solution is to press simultaneously the Control, Alt, and Delete keys, which initiate the reboot sequence. I am sure there are several sermons about the significance of those three keys, but we will save those for another day. For tonight, let me suggest that Jesus offers John the keystrokes that initiate the believers' reboot sequence: The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead rise, and all the rest. You see, in the Messianic world, when things start slowing down, and error messages start popping up, or we experience the blue screen of death, the solution is to go back to the basics of what Jesus did, and reboot. We reboot today with the same words John heard, because the basic divine code is the same, the same things are necessary for God's machinery to keep running. Please don't mistake me for a theist, those eighteenth century types who believed that God was a divine watchmaker who assembled the world, wound it up, and just let it run on its own. But don't think for a minute that God doesn't have plans for the world that involve it, and us, running smoothly. I doubt there are many of us who have Messianic expectations like John and so many others of his time. We do not have illusions that Jesus will assemble a divine army and wipe out the likes of Al-Qaeda and all

of our nations' other enemies. But that doesn't mean our Messianic expectations are necessarily in the right order even with the hindsight of two thousand years. Perhaps we too need to reboot even if from the opposite expectation, but in response to hearing the same words of Jesus.

John looks for a judging and avenging Jesus, only to find one who heals. We look for a saving Jesus, only to find one who heals. It is fair, I think, to categorize much of contemporary Christianity as focused on, or content with, Jesus as the one who secures the fate of believers after death. If we have made the right profession of faith, if we are "born again," we are in, and Jesus has done his job as our personal Messiah, and our eternity is no longer in doubt. In contrast to John's idea of Messiah as very much *of* this world, sword or spear in hand, our idea of Messiah is very much *not of* this world, at the gates of Heaven with the book of life in hand. But neither of these corresponds to the picture of Messiah that Jesus paints in his message to John's disciples. Neither is the full picture of the scope of God's anointed one. It is as if we, like John from prison, had heard of what Jesus had been doing, and from our hospital deathbeds sent our friends to ask if he really was the one we had been hoping he was, only to have him answer as he answered John, about the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, the lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead being raised, and the poor having good news brought to them. And we, expecting a Messiah who has made our reservation in heaven, are no better off than John, who expected a Messiah who would make his reservation

in the newly renovated, and Roman-free, Jerusalem Hilton. John dies in jail, we die in the hospital, and still, the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are clean, the deaf hear, the dead live, and the poor rejoice at the good news of the Gospel. Jesus is still the Messiah whether we have understood him correctly or not. Thanks be to God for that!

Advent is the time of year God gives us to reboot our expectations of Messiah, of who Jesus is for us, and for the world. It is so easy for him to become just what we need him to be, rather than who he really was, and is. It is so easy to picture him only as the babe in the manger, or only as the one suffering on the cross, or only the one coming in glory on the clouds, rather than all of these at once, and still the one who makes the blind see, and the lame walk, and who brings good news to the poor. It is so easy to see him as our little possession, or as the projection of our own fantasies of what we want God to be like. The paradox of Advent is that we celebrate the once and future coming of Christ, at his weakest and at his strongest, in his humanity and his divinity, and in all his fullness. Jesus has brought down Empires even if he was not a revolutionary. Jesus has welcomed the faithful to their eternal home, even if he is not their personal ticket in the sky. 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 offense at me.” Chaos reigns within. Reflect, repent, and reboot. Order shall return. Amen.