

Sermon for December 12, 2010
Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11
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Go and tell John what you hear and see. Those were Jesus' words to John's disciples. John the Baptist was in prison. He'd been arrested, probably for causing political problems: for criticizing Herod's relationship with his brother's wife.

John had such great hopes for Jesus; but as things went along, Jesus just didn't fit the Messianic stereotypes. He was from the line of David, through his father Joseph; but he showed **absolutely no interest** in becoming the Messiah-King in David's line.

He commanded great crowds; but every time the discussion of throwing off the hated Roman oppressors came up, he talked about turning the other cheek, loving your enemies, examining your own heart before you judged anyone else.

He occasionally called himself the Son of Man, which was the name of the expected apocalyptic figure who would arrive on the clouds of heaven, and rid the land of sin and oppression.

But his arrival – born to poor parents in a stable in Bethlehem – had been about as modest and unassuming as you could imagine.

John was in jail. His own time on earth was limited. And he couldn't figure Jesus out. So he sent his disciples to ask him: *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

Jesus didn't say simply yes or no to John's disciples. Instead, he said this to them:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Jesus was referring to words in Isaiah that point in a different direction from what most people were thinking about the Messiah. They are from our first reading, and a couple of other places.

They include the following concerns: *The poor have the good news. The disabled are made whole, and invited into community. The outcast is welcomed. The neediest are filled with good things. The broken-hearted are healed and the oppressed are freed.*

"That's what it will be," says Jesus. "Israel has got this whole Messiah thing wrong. People don't get to decide what the Messiah will be like; God decides."

It's clear that there was, and is, a continuing disagreement between Judaism and Christianity over this issue of the Messiah. What is more important, however, is that the church has also struggled to understand Jesus, to follow the real Messiah.

When Emperor Constantine first made Christianity legal in the Roman Empire, and then made it the official religion of the empire, bishops in the church – in the space of about 15 years – went from being persecuted to being powerful.

Fifteen years after being persecuted for their beliefs, they were taken to the First Ecumenical Council, in Nicea, in Roman Imperial splendor, and guaranteed free lodging by the Emperor.

From that time on, Jesus the ruler and conqueror had the upper hand over Jesus the servant. This passionate advocate of love for enemies, was transformed into the destroyer of enemies.

Just as Jesus' own world struggled to see in him the Messiah of God (preferring instead a King, a military commander, or apocalyptic liberator), the church struggled to maintain this vision of a Messiah come to fill the poor, free the oppressed, and offer salvation to all.

Over time, the church chose power and control. There are people on the religious right today who would like Jesus to be that kind of Messiah – destroying his enemies, ignoring the poor, holding up the rich and well-off as signs of what God rewards and blesses.

I worry about those people. When the power of patriotism, the fear of foreigners, the mania of materialism, and the dynamic of religious devotion are all brought together: faithful Christian reading, and the difficult life to which Jesus calls us, have little chance.

Jesus didn't say yes or no to John, he said: *Go and tell John what you see and hear. Watch what I'm doing, and you'll know who I am.*

It's so simple, really. We recognize the Messiah when the hungry are fed, strangers and outcasts are welcomed, those suffering in body and soul are made whole, peace is extended to enemies, the grieving are comforted, and forgiveness and salvation are **offered** to all.

That is the work of the Messiah, and of those who follow him.

The text never says it's about having the tallest Christmas tree, the biggest house, the most presents, the fanciest car, **or the greatest success in the world's eyes.**

It's funny, isn't it? It's about giving, and caring, and healing, and loving – even in the face of danger, or sacrifice.

And it's about those things right now. That's one of the most interesting parts of these two Biblical stories. John asks Jesus: *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* And Jesus says: "Look what's happening right here, right now."

He would say the same to us, today. Where are the poor and hungry being fed and helped? I am right there.

Where are the outcasts, and those who are discriminated against, being welcomed and affirmed? I am right there.

Where are the prisoners and the undocumented aliens being visited and offered a friend and a home? I am right there.

Where are the sick and the grieving and the lonely being embraced and upheld? Where are forgiveness and peace being offered, even at the risk of rejection, or worse? I am right there.

If we look carefully, we can see these things happening in our world today; and seeing that, we can know the presence of Christ, the Incarnate One of God.

The celebration of the birth of Christ prepares us to see the work of Christ everywhere it is being done. It prepares us to hear those words that Jesus spoke: *Go and tell John what you hear and see.*

For the grace and peace and love of Christ, which are alive and active in our world right now, we give God thanks and praise. Amen.