

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

ISAIAH 11:1-10; MATTHEW 11:2-11
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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I want to begin with what philosophers call a “thought experiment.”

(A thought experiment is basically imagining a hypothetical situation but apparently philosophers get kind of bored pondering inscrutable mysteries of the universe for years upon end, and need to come up with impressive-sounding terms for everyday things ☺.)

I want you to imagine that you have been blindfolded and led to a room.

Your blindfold is taken off and you have a look around.

You see a medium sized room—roughly four meters by four meters (13x13 feet). You see a single bed off to one side with a night table and a lamp on it, as well as a few books. You see a small brown desk off to the other side with a simple wooden chair in front of it. There is a medium-sized TV and a remote control, along with a card indicating how to access Wi-Fi services.

Off to the side, you see a bathroom with a sink, a toilet, a shower. You see a tacky painting on one wall opposite a window that looks out on to the street a few meters below. Above the bed is a simple light and a fan.

Do you have this picture in your mind?

Now, I want half of you to imagine that, prior to being blindfolded, you were told that you were about to be taken to the Penthouse suite of a luxury hotel to celebrate your anniversary.

How are you feeling right about now?

- single bed?!
- no Jacuzzi tub?!
- small room!

- Not very luxurious!

You're disappointed, right?

I want the other half of you to imagine that you had been traveling in a foreign country and, prior to being blindfolded you were arrested because your passport was missing a page and told that you were going to be taken to a prison cell.

How are you feeling?

- Pretty happy!
- Wi-Fi access = the ability to communicate, possibly alert others to your plight
- a bed!
- A window to the outside world!
- Luxury!

The same room in both cases. What changed? Why are some of you feeling miserable right now while others are elated?

Expectations. What we expect *shapes*, possibly in some cases even *determines* what and how we see.

We don't have to imagine such extreme examples.

If the weather forecast says it's going to be sunny and hot, we will be mildly annoyed to discover that it is cool and drizzly as we walk about town. But if the forecast had said, there's going to be a few showers today, this would barely have registered for us.

If we expect an uncluttered appointment-free day with plenty of opportunity to catch up on a few projects, and then discover a few hastily-scheduled meetings, we will feel differently than if those meetings had been on our calendar for the past month and we went to work expecting them.

Students. Two words: pop quiz.

If you had expected the test you will be far less annoyed (or at least *differently* annoyed) than if it was a surprise, right? ☺

What we expect shapes what and how we see.

I want to move to another room, another set of expectations.

John the Baptist is in a real prison cell. He had been there since the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee.

It seems King Herod took exception to John's fiery preaching about "the one who is to come" and *really* didn't like it when John denounced him for marrying his brother's ex-wife (Mat 14:3-12).

So John's been sitting in his jail for a long time now, and he's heard rumours and whispers of what this Jesus has been doing all over the countryside. He has been healing, preaching, teaching (including the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is the new Moses delivering the new Law delivered from a new mountain), and generally causing quite a bit of a stir.

John is intrigued. But he's also a little disappointed.

He had been expecting something a bit different. He had been expecting a fiery Messiah to come up and execute judgment on Israel's corrupt leaders. He had probably even been expecting Israel's liberator to confront the power of Rome and overthrow Rome's puppet king Herod. He had been expecting a glorious king!

Our family has a tradition of watching *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy every year around Christmastime. For those who are familiar with the films, the third one —*The Return of the King*—is characterized by a massive, climactic battle scene where Aragorn, the rightful king of the city of Gondor, returns to liberate it from a corrupt king and the threat of the evil Sauron. It's an incredible scene, an incredible battle.

Perhaps John was expecting something like this. Perhaps he was expecting this Jesus to do what Israel's Messiah was *supposed* to do: come in with a flourish, mobilize an army, set Israel free, judge and defeat her enemies, and put all things right.

Remember, this is the same John who, in our text last week, said these words about the one who he was preparing the way for:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Mat. 3:12).

John clearly expected the Messiah to clean house!

But John is still in jail. Herod is still ruling with an iron fist. His people, the Jews, are still led by religious leaders who are corrupt and governed by self-interest. And Rome is still the ominous threat that hung over all of the known world.

And so John's confused. He wants to know what's going on. This wasn't what he expected. He asks his followers to go and ask this Jesus plainly, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

If you're not going to do what needs doing, just let us know so we will save our hopes for someone else!

And Jesus responds as Jesus so often does: by kind of changing the subject.

He doesn't say, "well, yes, John, I am the one who is to come, and if you'll just be a bit more patient, you'll see. I'm not going to be exactly what you're expecting, I'm not going to fulfill Israel's hope in exactly the way that many imagine, but just hang on and you'll see that I'm a pretty decent Messiah after all!"

No, he appeals to John's followers themselves. *Go tell John what you hear and see.*

The blind receive their sight (Mat. 9:27-30).

The lame walk (Mat. 9:2-8).

The lepers are cleansed (Mat 8:1-4).

The deaf hear (Mat. 4:23-25).

The dead are raised (Mat 9:18-26).

Good news is proclaimed to the poor (Mat. 5:1-12).

Can you see what Jesus is doing here? He is reorienting John's expectations. He is saying, yes, I know that there are texts that speak of judgment and victory and ultimate justice for God's people. And that will come. But there are other important aspects of what it means for God's Messiah to come.

Instead of calling to memory texts of judgment and final victory over Israel's enemies, Jesus directs John's attention to Isaiah 35. And what does Isaiah 35 say?

- "The lame shall leap like a deer" (Isa. 35:6)
- "The eyes of the blind shall be opened (Isa. 35:5)
- "The ears of the deaf shall be unstopped" (Isa. 35:5)
- "The tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy" (Isa. 35:6)

What Jesus is saying to John is quite simple. The scriptures *are* being fulfilled in me, but the script will not be unfolding exactly as you imagined, though.

Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me!

Don't be embarrassed or disappointed because I'm not meeting your expectations in the way that you imagined that they ought to be me. Don't be surprised when God's ways turn out to be different than yours.

Don't be shaken when the author of the story begins to write a surprising chapter with unpredictable characters and plot twists and turns.

Jesus reorients John's expectations and the expectations of all who were listening, and teaches them to see differently.

So, what do you see this Advent?

- Suffering? (As I was reading texts this week about the blind seeing, the lame walking etc., I spent time with my sister-in-law who has been struggling with years of migraine headaches)
- Violence (another school shooting in Colorado this week; anniversary of Sandy Hook Elementary shootings)?
- War, corruption, greed (Central African Republic)?
- Political instability around the world (Ukraine)
- Natural disasters that cause incalculable human suffering (recent typhoon in the Philippines, flooding in the Gaza Strip that has displaced 40 000 people, snow in Syria)?
- A culture of cynicism and skepticism toward God?

Are we perhaps, like John the Baptist sitting in his prison cell? We see goodness in our world, we see signs of God's kingdom here and there, but we also see plenty of evidence that things are not yet as they should be.

Perhaps, like John, we are disappointed by the apparent lack of progress we see in the God's project for God's world.

Maybe this Advent looks like business as usual in a fallen world that still waits for the final rule and reign of God.

What would Jesus say to us, if we were to ask him, "are you the one?"

I think Jesus might challenge our expectations and get us to reconsider what part of the story we are in.

He would remind us those of us who are prone to complaining about the absence of miraculous evidence of God's presence in the world, that we are Jesus' hands and feet in the world during this time between his first and second Advent.

The church is the body of Christ, and the church is one of the most important ways in which many people will encounter Jesus in this part of the story.

He would remind us that when we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, shelter the stranger, we are manifesting the presence of Christ in the world.

When we welcome the stranger, visit the prisoner, tend to the sick... we are manifesting the presence of Christ in the world

When we speak gladly of the transformative power of Jesus in a culture hungry for good news, we are manifesting the presence of Christ.

I think Jesus would point to the existence of all kinds of ordinary followers of Jesus throughout history who have founded hospitals, orphanages, relief organizations—people who have tended to the lame, the blind, the deaf, the lonely, the poor, the neglected, the vulnerable.

Maybe, if we were to ask Jesus, "are you the one?" he might respond with a question for us: "Are *you* reflecting my presence in the world? Because *you* are how I work in the world these days."

And I think Jesus would tell us to keep our eyes open for signs of newness.

They can be very small things. Not necessarily flashy, miraculous ways, but in mustard-seed kinds of ways. I think Jesus would tell us to keep our eyes open for the small ways in which the kingdom is spreading every day.

Everyday gestures, everyday conversations, everyday commitments to love as Jesus did, everyday decisions to reorient our conceptions of what greatness and power and strength look like according to the pattern of Jesus.

And, finally, I think Jesus would direct our attention to the same place he pointed John the Baptist.

He would hold before us the eschatological vision of a new heaven and a new earth, where all is made right, where pain and suffering fade away, where the crocus bursts forth in the wilderness, where the desert itself bursts into song...

Where the ransomed of the Lord return to Zion with everlasting joy upon their heads...

Where sorrow and sadness flee away, giving way to the joy and gladness of God's eternal kingdom.

I think Jesus would want us to keep this vision in mind, during Advent, or any other time of the year.

More importantly, he would want us to allow everything we say and do in this mixed up in between time between his first and second Advent, to give evidence of where we are convinced that God is leading this story.

Amen.

