

Keeping It Simple

Matthew 11:2-11

For whatever reason, my annual ambition for Christmas never quite matches up with my usual experiences of it. This is not a complaint, just an observation. My perennial goal is to keep things simple in order to fully bask in the true spirit of the season.

Yet, almost every year I find myself in a bit of a frenzy from start to finish—always anticipating the next activity on the calendar, challenged by all the complications and immediate distractions that come with gift-giving, card-writing, house-decorating, holiday baking, concert-going, Christmas partying, and finding time for socializing with friends and family—a list that at times seems longer than Santa’s—all the while trying to maintain the normal routine, workload, and responsibilities of life! By Christmas Day, I’m usually exhausted and feel like I’ve missed out on too much of the season, wondering where the time went. Once the ornaments get packed up and stored and a new year begins, I ask myself, “Why can’t I manage to keep things simple and to the point? Why do I get so busy, so stressed and frazzled, missing much of the joy and spirit I yearn to experience and keep?”

I’m not alone, I’m sure. It’s easy to get caught up in the frenzy of activity, in part because this holiday has come to represent so much that is important to us, individually and collectively, enough that we will go out of our way to avoid anyone’s disappointment. Along with that, we aspire to make the holiday meaningful and memorable, since our best experiences of joy, sentimentality, kindness, charity, and generosity are wrapped up in our expectations of what this season is

all about—of cherished love and heartfelt appreciation, of innocence and childhood imagination all the way to the sweet grace of an elder’s embrace, of finding harmony within our household and peace in our world. We want Christmas to be all these good things and more—everything that is noble and decent and beautiful in human life and in our personal memories. I often think that the frenetic tenor of our preparations and hyperactive schedule is due to our earnest desire to make all of it happen fully and perfectly—wanting to experience as much as we can what is good for ourselves and for others in yet so little available time.

Scottish poet, Alexander Smith, once wrote: “Christmas is the day that holds all time together.” For many of us, it does—so much rides on our expectations of it. Yet, at times the very things we yearn for elude us because we are looking for satisfaction in the wrong place or we are too stressed out to make something happen that won’t without the very spirit being evident in who we already are. That’s the crux of it: all of the busyness and festivity of this season is really not essential. The spirit of Christmas will only reside in us when we let go of all the agendas and matters that distract and prevent us from simply embracing what is essential, i.e., the grace and love that God has for all of humanity. The message of Christmas is really quite that simple.

In my reading, this is the point of our lectionary text for this morning. When you heard it, you might have thought it’s an odd passage to draw inspiration from ten days before Christmas. You would be right. This part of the Jesus story actually occurs three decades after his birth; however, it’s also when the advent of the

messiah had its more genuine context and prophetic impact. In spite of our Christmas tales, a public recognition of Jesus as the promised messiah was not necessarily a birthright from Bethlehem! Even though thirty years later is a long time, in Matthew's telling, if Jesus was the messiah—the Promised One—it didn't seem to matter to most people until then—at some point after John the Baptist's arrest.

John, of course, made his mark by preparing the way for the coming of the messiah and the reign of God. In our text, Jesus honors him for being the Elijah-like prophet for his time. John did so by calling people out into the wilderness to reset their priorities and to ignite their enthusiasm for the coming of the Lord, which was about to transform their world.

However, when we read this passage, it's easy to miss what goes unsaid. That is, in the restive environment of first-century Judea, where periodic armed rebellions rose up against the Roman occupation, the common portrait of the coming messiah was of a warrior/king like David—a heroic ideal that had existed at various times throughout Israel's history and particularly since the days of Judas Maccabaeus. A century and a half before Jesus' birth, the Maccabaens led a revolt against the Seleucids, which eventually led to Jewish independence. However, this taste of freedom was relatively short-lived, lasting only fifty years until the Roman armies invaded the territory and unceremoniously imposed their own puppet regime on the region, the hatred Jewish tyrant, Herod the Great.

So for seventy years prior to John's prophetic ministry, Herod and his sons ruled the region with an iron hand and with allegiance to Rome. Resistance in both Judea and Galilee was always festering

below the surface; the messianic hope for most Judeans was of another “Braveheart” type of national savior, who would rise up to defeat the Herodians and permanently deliver the people of Israel from their current bondage under Rome. Various rebel leaders who led armed insurrections would try to embody this messianic role, at least until they were brutally crushed by Herod’s forces or Roman armies (cf. Acts 5:35-39). Strength against strength was the common battle cry, so those on each end of the Judean world—from rulers to the rebels—kept an eye on who was amassing followers, standing up to authorities, and speaking out against the current regime.

Jesus was one of those recruiting followers. As we know, his message and teachings were frequently critical of the status quo, but what set him apart was that his disciples were not encouraged or trained to take up arms as a guerrilla movement. That appealed to some followers, but likely lost him widespread popular support. Throughout the Gospels, on many occasions Jesus didn’t publicly embrace the messianic role, presumably because of what people would misunderstand him to be.

This is important to note, for this helps to explain why John, languishing in Herod’s prison, wondered if Jesus was the one they were waiting for. Would he be the great deliverer—the savior of Israel—who would fight the final and decisive battle for Zion? John didn’t know for sure, so he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, *Are you the real deal or should we wait for someone else?*

We will never know if Jesus’ response satisfied John (or anyone else for that matter) when he remarked:

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.

This, of course, paraphrased what the prophet Isaiah forecast in announcing the coming of God's reign on earth—the signs of that time not being those of cosmic judgment and wrath, but rather the good news of healing and deliverance for the poor and disenfranchised, bringing hope to those without it.

In other words, rather than embrace the expected role and bear the mantle of the warrior messiah, Jesus invited John to answer his own question. Was Jesus the messiah—the promised one of God, or only a distraction from the essential hope and expectation of his people? Was this who you envisioned the great messianic deliverer to be, or were you looking for someone or something else? Will the works of healing provide sufficient evidence of God's coming reign, or do you need something more to satisfy your deepest desires for a strong deliverer? Did John believe Jesus was the reason for this season of hope?

Jesus' response makes this a far more crucial passage in the Gospel story than many realize. The messianic role Jesus was embracing was not one that would strive for Jewish independence and Rome's downfall in the conventional sense; he would not attempt to fulfill the immediate messianic dreams of his own people by leading them into a heavenly battle. Instead, he would launch a spiritually liberating movement that would transform the course of humankind from the bottom up.

Jesus began with evidence from the margins. He changed the lives of those without hope within Judea and Galilee—not just

politically hopeless, but those whose lives would not likely have changed for the better, even if King David himself rose up from the dead and claimed the throne! It was a magnificent God-point to make: the salvation the people of Israel needed wasn't at the level of government, it was in how they, like everyone else, treated the most vulnerable people on earth, even among their own. As history proved repeatedly, even God's chosen ones couldn't expect lasting deliverance from those who oppressed them when they weren't being truly just to their own people, seeking to spiritually liberate and include those within their own kin and communities who were treated as if they were expendable—cast to the margins of their world and their moral concern!

Where was the evidence that lepers wouldn't still be outcast and treated like pox if Rome fell and Judah's messianic king ruled on Zion? Would it be any different for prostitutes, day-laborers, orphans and widows, the mentally and physically challenged, or those without sight or hearing, and any other person in an oppressive, marginalized place? Would their lives be any different if a messiah/king ruled their land? All the vulnerable and exploited people of their generation, would they not still remain on the margins and be treated with scorn and disdain? What would political liberation mean if it didn't result in a transformation of how *all people* were treated—not just those they favored, but those they themselves oppressed in their own society? How would it be any different than Herod or Rome, their current oppressors?

Jesus' response here to John and his disciples was a watershed moment for popular messianic dreams of deliverance, pitting the

interests of the mainstream against those of God's on the margins. In Matthew's mind, I doubt John was the one needing to have this explained. But I would say, the response Jesus gave him was meant for everyone who raised the same question as John: "Are you really the one we want, or who we imagine our savior to be, or is it someone else?" Or let me put it this way into our own context: do we make the spirit of Christmas—the season for preparing for Christ's coming—more about what we want the message to be—what is palatable to our ears and what it will mean for our personal lives and our private interests, instead of what it actually was and was meant to be? Is this season of the coming of Christ only about what we'll get out of it?

The answer is what we will make it be. As I said earlier, sometimes the very things we yearn for elude us because we are looking for satisfaction in the wrong place or we are far too stressed to make something happen that won't without the very spirit being evident in who we already are. In other words, we may live with a similar disconnect and dilemma as did Jesus' contemporaries over how we want God to act in our world or to be present in our lives. Do we expect Jesus to conform to our own messianic needs—our yearning for a savior or strong deliverer? Or will we follow him to where he goes and embrace those he includes? Who are the poor and oppressed in our world, whose lives won't change no matter who runs the government?

I don't know if we can easily answer that. It's complicated, isn't it? But I believe it means we can't generate or be swept up by the true spirit of Christmas if we are conveniently ignorant of how our own lives, choices, and desires directly or indirectly exploit the most

vulnerable of our world. It makes us think twice about what we buy and from whom we buy gifts, doesn't it? But what a good feeling it would be to know that when you spend your money, it's for those who are in greatest need for it, whether locally or around the world. Fair trade is a good start.

Obviously, the spirit of Christmas—of Christ's coming—goes beyond that. It also has great bearing on what we value and our relationships in society. The true intention of Christ's coming is easier to sense and experience when our lives already reflect the priorities and values Jesus expressed. It's easier to be gracious and charitable toward those who are along the margins of our lives or our world if we already care about them at other times.

Even in our personal ties with family and friends, what we want out of this season of great, abundant love is more easily felt when we keep our interactions with others straight-forward and uncomplicated. We might reflect on who is excluded, marginalized, or scorned in our families, either by choice or circumstances? Or, as the case may be, who's the "leper" we try to avoid or exclude; who may feel oppressed by the poisonous attitudes and behaviors currently existing in our families?

If there's a broken, strained relationship—fix it; extend an apology, ask forgiveness, instead of letting things fester. Relieve yourself and others of the stress and strain of trying to avoid it. Likewise, don't oppress others with your anger, your poor attitude, and your lack of cooperation and care. Life only gets more complicated when we place unnecessary obstructions and hardships on the relationships of our lives.

All of this follows the true messianic dream of Christ's coming—the spirit of Christmas transforming human relationships, saving lives, and sharing generously. It's about trying to value and include everyone God loves, not just the ones we favor. It's a simple message and an inspiring focus for this season and for all seasons. The genuine spirit of Christmas, in honoring the coming of God into our midst, is one that affirms a deep and abiding love for humanity and restores the spirit of grace and value to the world God created and loves. Capturing and sharing that spirit is the most redemptive gift we can offer.

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.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
15 December 2013