

A Changed World – December 13, 2009 – Third Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 35: 1-10; Matthew 11: 2-11

In this morning's passage from Matthew's Gospel, we see followers of John the Baptizing Prophet coming to see Jesus at John's request in order to ask Jesus this question: "Are you the one who is supposed to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Now, we need to remember that John is sending this delegation of his followers while John is in prison; and we need to also remember that in time John will be decapitated at the whim of young Salome on the orders of her uncle King Herod.

And we need to also remember what had been occurring both while this delegation to Jesus was sent and before the question was ever asked.

- **Jesus had already named and had trained his first twelve disciples**, advising them to be wise as serpents and as innocent as doves; calling on them to "proclaim the good news" that God's Kingdom has drawn near; and instructing them to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons."
- **And there has been healing going on.**

Jesus had healed a leper, had healed the servant of a Roman soldier, had healed Peter's mother-in-law, and had healed a man who was paralyzed.

Jesus had returned to life a little girl who had died; had healed an older woman who had been suffering most of her life from hemorrhages - and two men who were blind - and another man who could neither hear nor speak. People were coming to Jesus from all over to be healed... and Jesus was healing these people, often with just a word.

- **There was teaching going on.**

Hope and comfort and encouragement were being offered to people who before this man Jesus arrived had no hope. The people were learning that the merciful are blessed because of their mercy and the pure in heart will see God and that those who are grieving a loss will be comforted.

- **And people were learning to pray:** Jesus' prayer... A new kind of prayer... "Give us this day our daily bread; forgive our debts as we have forgiven our debtors..."

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And now we need to look carefully at the question that John's followers posed to Jesus ...
"Are you the one who is supposed to come, or are we to wait for another?"

“Are you the Messiah that we have been waiting for - looking for - or should we keep waiting, should we keep looking?” “Are you the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One about whom we have read - or are you a different kind of Messiah?”

In that question posed to Jesus, there is hope, there is expectation, and there is some worry.

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Listen to Jesus’ answer. It is bound to make you smile inside. It is understated, gentle – and yet powerful – laced with irony... and yet clear as the ringing of a bell.

“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 been given good news... Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Go and tell John what you have seen, Jesus says. Bear witness to what you have experienced. **People are receiving their sight, their hearing, their ability to walk. People are receiving their lives back again.** And then ask yourselves: **where or when have you seen this before? The answer is never, never before...**

Should you wait for another Messiah - or another kind of Messiah, Jesus is asking John’s followers? You can if you like; but look again at what you have seen. It is the work of the living God among us. And blessed – **happy** - are those who are not offended by what they are seeing... for what they are seeing God at work: redeeming, healing, rescuing, teaching God’s people.

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That wonderful holiday movie *It’s A Wonderful Life*, starring Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey is, among other things, a reflection on the meaning of our lives, asking the question: what would our community look like, **what would our world look like**, if we had never existed?

So let us, for a moment, step into the shoes of John’s followers and pose the same questions that John’s followers asked of Jesus: are you the real Messiah or not? And in that question, let’s immediately acknowledge that Jesus healed the sick and the afflicted and that Jesus raised people from the dead.

But now, let us ask this question: **how has Jesus’ presence in this world changed the world?** How would the world be different if Jesus had not lived?

And now let us answer that question by identifying just three ways - **three historical and thus measurable categories** - how the birth of Jesus - **how the life of Jesus** - has changed this world.

Here are the three categories... education, medicine and healing, and acts of Christian kindness and courage

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First, education... John Harvard was a dedicated and devout English Puritan pastor, who, like all Puritans of that time – and of this time - believed that it was **imperative** for Christians to respond to God’s grace and mercy through selfless acts that glorified God by helping others.

In 1638, one year after he became the pastor of the Puritan church in Charlestown near Boston, Massachusetts, John Harvard contracted tuberculosis and died. In his will, he divided his entire estate in half – one half to support his widow and the other half for the creation of the first university in America, named Harvard University a year after his death.

Harvard's original motto was "Truth for Christ and the Church." Its original stated purpose was "to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life, and thus to make Christ the foundation of all learning."

Now... granted, over the years, things at Harvard have changed... you might say dramatically... you might even say, **radically**; but what cannot be disputed is that **Harvard began as a direct consequence of one person's faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ.**

As did Princeton, begun by four revival preachers in the midst of this nation's First Great Awakening. And also Yale... founded by four Congregational pastors...

And there's Duke, founded by practicing Quakers and Methodists, not at Durham, but in the nearby town of Trinity. Columbia University was founded "to teach children to know God in Jesus Christ." William and Mary began "so that the Christian faith may be proclaimed."

Southern Baptists founded Bluefield College in Virginia, Fork Union Military Academy in Virginia, Hargrave Military Academy – also in Virginia, and Liberty University, to name just a few.

And the Methodists founded American University, Vanderbilt, Randolph Macon in Virginia, as well as Bennett College in North Carolina and Morgan State in Maryland, the last two colleges created for the education of freed blacks following the civil war.

I could go on and on about this... There are many, many more schools of all kinds that faithful Christians created: colleges, high schools, training schools.

But ponder for a minute. Think what this nation, what this world would look like - **would be like** - if there simply were no men and women of Christian vision, if people were led not by the call of Christ but by their own self interests. Do you truly believe that our world would be the same - or that we would have the same quality of life? Or that our children would have the same opportunities to learn?

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And now, medicine... now the work of healing... Soon after the Christian Church established their official creed, their statement of faith... about the year 328... Christians began planning and building hospitals.

For it really is as simple as this: **before the Christian Church, there were no hospitals.** Because of Jesus, for the sake of Jesus, Christians throughout the world began building the very first hospitals and began providing systematic and complete care to those in need.

- ◆ In Christianity's first hundred years, as the plague swept through entire cities in Africa and Asia Minor, the pagans of those cities threw the sick and afflicted out of their homes and drove them out of the city.

That was the norm. **Christians took the sick off the street and welcomed them into their own homes. That was distinctive. That was distinctively Christian.**

- ◆ In the year 369, the Christian leader Basil of Caesarea built a 300 bed hospital that included a separate place for the treatment of people with leprosy and another section for the care of the dying, **the first ever hospice on record.**
- ◆ Just one hundred years later, every Christian church and monastery and cathedral that was built was expected as a matter of custom and common sense to have a school and a hospital attached to it.
- ◆ Florence Nightingale, the person who established the foundations of professional nursing saw her vocation as a direct call from God and would name the date of that call, February 7, 1837.
- ◆ And many if not most of the pioneers in medicine – those men who overcame ignorance and antiquated ideas with new approaches that saved lives and lessened pain - were committed Christians – people like Joseph Lister, a practicing Quaker, who introduced what are now common medical practices – such as doctors washing their hands and cleaning their scalpels before operating on you – or Louis Pasteur, who as a devout Catholic often expressed his astonishment that so many of his fellow doctors did not acknowledge the existence of God in what they were learning – and who is the person who created the first vaccine for rabies and who invented the way to stop milk from causing sickness.

Again, we could continue all day with this. We could name all the mission hospitals and all the hospitals in this country founded upon faith and all the hospitals that begin with the word “saint,” such as St. Mary’s in Richmond, St. Michael’s in Toronto, St. Francis in San Francisco, St. Joseph’s in Bangor, Maine - and so on. **We read in the Gospel that in the time of Jesus that there was healing going on.** Since the time of Jesus, healing has continued, in the name of Jesus, because of Jesus, by followers of Jesus.

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Now, acts of Christian kindness and courage.

Think about this season... Think about the work of this church and the two other churches connected to you, as awkwardly and even artificially connected as we may be.

Think about the Angel Tree, about the shoeboxes for the Samaritan Fund, about the heifers that we will purchase, about the shoes and coats that the children in the community will receive. Think about the people in this community who will have a meal this week - or the people who will have safe and affordable housing. Think about those women in faraway Dafur who can cook a meal without being beaten because they now have their own cooker or the children in Honduras who can see because of the eyeglasses we collected. Think about this afternoon when many people will gather to help out Scott Collier - a neighbor in trouble. Think about the

people we visit each and every day and the stories we hear and the time that we spend – in people’s homes and at the local jail. **And then ask yourselves – do you not see Christ in all of this?** Do you reasonably think that all this would have been accomplished if Christ was not at the center of our personal and combined lives?

Would we be the people we were if Christ had not come into this world and entered our lives... into so many lives? I think not.

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There is a wonderful story about an entire village in Northern France where the people systematically rescued, hid, fed, and then found safe passage for Jews during the Nazi occupation of that country.

First the Jews of France came; but soon news spread and Jews throughout much of Western Europe found that little village and the shelter and hospitality and safety that it offered.

There were no records to adequately count the number of lives that were saved, but the rough estimate is in the thousands. All of this was done by simple men and women; and all of this was done with their knowing that if they were discovered, the village and all who lived there would be quickly and ruthlessly destroyed.

A few years after the war, television reporters went to the village and interviewed the people there. The reporters wanted to know why they would take such a risk helping total strangers.

The filmed report shows the villagers staring back at the reporters as if they had two heads, as the villagers replied, “Parce que nous sommes chretiens.”

Because we are Christians... Because we follow Jesus, our Lord and Savior... because our lives, our habits, our choices, our priorities, our sentiments, and our moral lives are shaped by the fact that Jesus came into this world and has changed this world: forever and for good and for the glory of his Father in heaven.

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There is a popular saying making the rounds nowadays, a saying attributed to Gandhi. It says, “Be the change you want in this world.” It’s a good and worthy sentiment, **up to a point.**

And the point of departure, at least for me, is that it assumes we can do all these good things by ourselves and on our own.

We can’t. We need each other. And we need Jesus Christ: the Messiah for whom the world had waited; the source of all healing and wholeness; the Lord of the harvest and the giver of all good things, who meets people’s needs, who heals their hurts, who has changed this world.

The followers of John the Baptizing Prophet - and countless people since - some sincere and others looking for a fight, have asked this question. It is a question full of hope, expectation, worry, and deep wish that the answer is “yes.” “Are you the Messiah that we have been waiting for?”

We need to do as Jesus asked John’s followers to do: to look around us and see what healing and learning and acts of justice and kindness are being done... **in Jesus’ name...** and then for us to become the change that Jesus wants us to be. **Amen.**