

Advent III (RCL/A): "But I Asked for a Pony!" Is Our God Too Small?

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

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Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

**Why** does John send his followers to question Jesus instead of doing it himself?

Because he's in **prison**! 'Interesting, though, that he **does** have a way of communicating with his disciples on the outside. In *The Chosen* series about the Gospels (often more "Hollywood" than Holy Scripture), there's a wild looking John the Baptizer whom some of Jesus' disciples refer to (out of Jesus' earshot) as Creepy John. *The Chosen* portrays an elegant, wealthy woman named Joanna, a secret follower of Jesus, as the one who conveys messages from John to the outside world and back again. This isn't strictly Biblical but it **is** believable, since Joanna was married to Chuza, Herod's steward, his household manager. That put his wife and him high in the pecking order and presumably gave them freedom to come and go as they pleased.

Now **why** is John in prison?

Herod had both **personal** and **political** reasons for imprisoning John. On the **personal** side of things, Herod's wife, Herodias, was no fan of John and certainly made that known to her husband. John had repeatedly called out Herod & Herodias for being in an **adulterous** relationship, even though they were **married**. The issue was that Herodias was formerly married to Herod's brother, Philip. 'Remember from last week's Gospel how John addressed the Pharisees & Sadducees as, "You brood of vipers? I don't know what his pet names were for Herod & Herodias, but they weren't positive. We can bet Herodias had told her husband to shut John up, by any means possible, preferably permanently.

The **political** reason for arresting and detaining John was that he was way too popular with the people. The Romans and those who answered to them, like Herod, didn't want anyone to

outshine them, especially if those “celebrities” might have an anti-Roman agenda. John didn’t advocate overthrowing the government but he **did** talk about the Lord’s Chosen One headed their way. That registered in most people’s minds as the arrival of the messiah. So the safest political move was to take John out of circulation so he couldn’t fan the flames of revolt, if the people convinced him to, or if he decided to do so on his own.

At our Wednesday Bible study someone asked **why**, since John had baptized Jesus, been right there when the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and the heavenly voice declared, *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”* (Matt. 3:17), **why** would he now be wondering if Jesus was indeed the chosen one of God?? Well, we’re not clear from the baptismal passage whether anyone **other** than Jesus saw the dove and heard the Voice in the moment. But we **do** know John initially **resisted** baptizing Jesus when He stood before him. John protested, saying, *“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”* (Matt. 3:14) Jesus insisted and John finally agreed, but it sure seems John knew from the get-go that Jesus was *“the one who is to come”* (Matt. 11:3). So what changed?? Why is he second-guessing now?

It doesn’t seem like a stretch to think that a person would have a different perspective as a prisoner inside a cell than as a free agent out in the world. John never predicted Jesus was going to vie with Caesar for the throne in Rome, but John **did** say Jesus was going to deal with sin and with sinners. To avoid that awful fate, his advice was: “Repent!” Have a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of life course. Herod sure hadn’t. But Herod was still on his throne, the Pharisees & Sadducees were still sticking to the letter of the law but savaging its spirit, and now John was rotting in a cell. What was wrong with this picture? When was Jesus going to get with the program, start fulfilling some of what John predicted the long-awaited one had come to do?? If the Messiah was going to separate wheat from chaff, why was Herod Antipas still on his throne??

Jesus wasn't meeting John the Baptizer's expectations of the Messiah. Awhile later, Jesus won't be meeting Judas' expectations of the Messiah either. Truth be told, maybe some days Jesus doesn't meet **our** expectations. We pray for a certain outcome, as hard as we know how, and our prayers seem to go unheard and unanswered. Our request **wasn't** like a child living in a studio apartment asking for a pony for Christmas. We really felt like we prayed a **worthy, unselfish** prayer. It wasn't for financial gain, but for spiritual growth. It wasn't for worldly success but for a meaning-full relationship. It wasn't healing for myself, but for somebody else. It was heartfelt and hope-filled. Then it didn't go as I hoped and I ended up disappointed. I sort of wondered, *"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"* Are You the loving, responsive God I thought You were, or did I get You wrong? **Or are You, Lord, as "right" as ever, and I simply need to acknowledge that my expectation is wrong?** After all, as St. Thomas More once said (**before** he was beheaded), "It is not God's pleasure to send us to heaven on feather beds." J.B. Phillips wrote a book called *Your God Is Too Small*. He gives various examples of how we can mistakenly put God in a box of our own creation. For instance, we treat God like a Santa to whom we present unending wish lists, or expect God to act like a policeman, or confine our vision of Jesus to that of Good Shepherd (or "Pale Galilean," as Phillips writes), meek and mild, splitting off the Christ who overturned the money changers' tables in the Temple or the One who, à la John the Baptizer, called the Pharisees "whitewashed sepulchers."

Catherine of Siena said, "All the way to Heaven is Heaven, because Jesus said, 'I am the Way.'" But we know from personal experience that our lives here don't always **feel** like Heaven! When grief, tragedy, spiritual disappointment test our faith, may the Holy Spirit help us revisit our expectations and open our eyes to see that our Savior is vastly different and far "more" than we expect: not defined by our limited understanding or driven by our desires. When I struggle with

God not meeting my expectations, I'm helped by praying this prayer, in which a Confederate soldier viewed his suffering through the lens of faith:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.  
 I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey ...  
 I asked for health, that I might do great things.  
 I was given infirmity, that I might do better things ...  
 I asked for riches, that I might be happy.  
 I was given poverty, that I might be wise ...  
 I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men.  
 I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God ...  
 I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.  
 I was given life, that I might enjoy all things ...  
 I got nothing I asked for—but everything I had hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.  
 I am, among men, most richly blessed”

In Matthew 14 the evangelist gives the backstory of John's imprisonment and tells of his earthly fate: beheading at Herod's order. In *The Chosen* presentation of his last moments, John is depicted looking out the window of his cell and seeing a lamb on the hillside, a reminder of the Baptizer's exclamation to his disciples at the beginning of John's Gospel: “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!*” Let us believe John was consoled this side of Heaven by the assurance that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed “*the one who is to come*,” giving the blind their sight, cleansing the lepers, making the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the dead live again. Mysteriously John's imprisonment was part **of**, not apart **from**, the coming of the kingdom of heaven. We can say the same of our own and of the world's suffering. It is part **of**, not apart **from**, the coming of the kingdom. Jesus was **John's** Messiah, and He is **our** Messiah and Lord as well: ever-present to us, ever-faithful in **all** seasons, ever-patient with our questions and doubts, ever-loving beyond our comprehension, ever-saving beyond our knowledge, beyond this life to the next. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

