

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
3rd Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2016

To be a pilgrim on the Way, to be a disciple of Jesus, I discovered on my trip to the Holy Land, means being willing to go down, deep down into the earth, deep down into my soul, to find Jesus. Literally, we descended many flights of steps at the holy sites, to find the Star of Bethlehem which commemorates the birth place of Jesus, to find the grotto where Jesus lived in Nazareth, or to find the prison cell where Jesus was held the night before his trial. From a practical point of view, this is because over these many centuries, churches have been built upon, torn down, restored, built upon again, all on top of these original sites. We descended down the steps, through the spaces of modern structures, the Franciscan edifices, through the Byzantine churches built by Queen Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, who institutionalized the Jesus Movement into Christianity, through the early Roman foundations, and then down to the first century space and ruins, where we found the places of Jesus' birth, life, ministry, and death.

From a spiritual perspective, we went down deep into our souls to ask the same question that John asks of Jesus in our gospel today: Are you really the one? This is the question we each need to ask of Jesus and the one we each need to answer for ourselves. For you will notice in our story, Jesus doesn't claim the title of Messiah, in response to John's question, but rather Jesus says, "Look at what I'm doing" and then you decide. In our modern context, the questions may be rephrased as, "Is there anything to our religion?" or "Has the church really gotten hold of something that matters, or is this business of Christmas and its Christ only a fanciful tale, charming, but ultimately worthless and powerless against the forces that dampen hopes and deaden dreams?" Look at what the church is doing, then you decide.

John asks this question from prison, where he had been sent as a political enemy by Herod. John asks this question because something doesn't quite add up for him. Jesus was not acting the way John thought a Savior would act. John was preaching that Jesus would bring God's judgment, that he would gather the wheat and scatter the chaff. Now it is John who is being treated like chaff, while Herod's power grows and flourishes. The lamb of God, whom John proclaimed Jesus to be, the one who takes away the sin of the world was not taking away sins of hatred and violence, but rather making John a victim of them. John preached repentance, vindication, and judgment. Jesus brought healing, restoration and wholeness. Judgment and condemnation don't appear to match up with restoration and wholeness. You can almost hear in John's question, "Who got this wrong?" "Is my idea of a messiah incorrect, or are you not the messiah?" I find it interesting that John, who preached repentance, was the one called to repent, to "go beyond the mind he had" in his answering of the question to Jesus, "Are you the one?".

Leaving John to ponder the need to stretch and reshape his perception of the Messiah to fit the reality of the one for whom he prepared the way, Jesus turns his attention to the crowd. He invites them to go deeper. Just as I walked down the flights of steps to the place of Jesus' birth, or descended into the depths of my soul to stretch and reshape my perception of the reality of the

Messiah who was born on that spot, Jesus probes their hearts by questioning them about why they were attracted to John. When they went into the desert of self-examination where John lived, what drove them there? What were they looking for? The repetition of this question three times is the strategy of a challenging and wise spiritual teacher, aiming to uncover the deepest desires of the heart, no longer allowing superficial answers to suffice.

We did a similar exercise in my spiritual direction training program. We paired up and one person repeatedly asked the question, “Who are you?”, until we stripped away some of the more superficial titles or ways people look at us or to us and we plunged deeply to the depths of our core identity, which had nothing to do with roles or responsibilities, but only to our relationship with God. You may want to try this exercise sometime with someone you trust. Repeat the question, “Who are you?” until the essence of the person is perceived and claimed.

Jesus knew that when the people opened that deepest, darkest, and most vulnerable spot of identity or desire, they were actually going to find Jesus. This was how John prepared the way for Jesus. He brought people into the wilderness. He provoked them into self-examination so they could see all of whom they were. He insisted they dig deeply in the messiness of their souls to uncover their desire for what Jesus could offer: healing and wholeness.

John’s words of vindication, condemnation and repentance broke open that vulnerable place in people in need healing. They may not have known it, but what Jesus does was what they wanted. They wanted their sight restored, their legs to move, their skin made clean, their ears to be opened, their life to be flowing, and their poverty enriched. In other words, they wanted wholeness and renewal. To the question, “Are you the One who is to come or shall we look for another?” Jesus answers, “Well, here is what I do. Is this what you are looking for? If you uncover the deepest desires of your heart, you will answer your own question and you will know that I am the One.”

There is great reward in plummeting into the depths of our souls to know our deepest desire, for there we will find our craving for God; for there, we will embrace our dependence upon God; for there we will prioritize our desire to be reunited and restored in God’s image; for there, we will express our love of God through our yearning for human companionship and love; and for there, we will be nourished, refreshed, and healed. If we are not in that place, we are invited by Jesus to plunge into this deepest place, for there we will live into the promise of healing through Jesus, set within the repentance proclaimed by John.

There is also great risk in plummeting into the depths of our souls, to know our deepest desire, for there we will uncover rough parts of ourselves we have chosen to push away; for there, we will bump up against the injury we have caused others; for there, we will shine a light on our shadow selves; for there, we will claim the brokenness we often have blinders for; for there will be stumble upon the despair, which only the love of God can turn into hopefulness. The healing Jesus offers happens miraculously, but is not magic. The healing Jesus offers leads us through, beyond and in the valley of the shadow of death, the path through the hard and rough places in our hearts and souls. We need to name and claim them as part of ourselves in order know our deepest desire is for Jesus.

I think this is the only redeeming part of the explosion of the expression of hate through offensive language and hurtful actions in the past several months. We can now name and claim the fuller brokenness of our human community and in that step we can call out our desire for wholeness and healing that only Christ can bring.

Advent is a time of self-examination, reflection, and waiting for Christ to be born anew within our hearts. To receive that goodness, we often need to eradicate, or at least to raise to the light of Christ those parts in need of healing, to allow the grace to flow within our whole being. While John preached repentance, going beyond where one's mind was then, going within to uncover one's deepest desire, Jesus brought healing. While John's fiery message encouraged honest self-examination, Jesus brought healing to the broken places discovered within. While John preached judgment, Jesus brought justice. John and Jesus' identities are entwined. Their roles aren't contradictory, but rather a part of the larger process of faith.

Is Jesus really the One? To answer that question affirmatively, to be a disciple of Jesus, means following Jesus into the tomb, into the dark and dead-like places in our souls or lives, so we can walk out into the light of Jesus' resurrection. The light is about to be born again on Christmas morning. Come, let us prepare our hearts, to find our deepest desire, so we may adore him.