

Through Prison Bars

sermon digest

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Isaiah 35:1-7,10; Matthew 11:2-6

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We were just out of seminary. (I finished in May, Carolyn in December.) We moved to a new community and a new church on the western edge of St. Louis. Our church was down the street from the Jewish synagogue in a brand new suburban community where the population was about a third Jewish, a third Catholic, and a third everyone else. We were among the “everyone else,” a minority. It was about this time of year, approaching the winter school vacation. The seasonal decorations, the songs on the radio, and the shopping centers were loaded with Christmas. I was invited to speak to a high school sociology class, studying the phenomenon of religion, comparing the beliefs of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. I suspect that a lot of conversation among the students had preceded my appearance. It was a public school. I fully understood that this was not a preaching opportunity and thought that I could lay out the basics for class discussion without creating controversy. I latched on to Paul Tillich’s simple statement about the primary difference between Christians and Jews: Jews are waiting for the Messiah; Christians believe that Messiah has come. Tillich believed that the messianic hope is common ground for discussion and discovery from both religions.

In the discussion that followed, a Jewish girl sitting in the back was first to speak. She began by noting that we had been involved in two world wars followed by the Korean war. That year, 1971, a “cold war” between superpowers threatened world destruction with nuclear weapons. As we spoke, bombs and bullets were flying in Vietnam. The Jewish Messiah was supposed to bring peace on earth. “Given the world situation, how can Christians claim that Messiah has come?” I tried to answer her question using the language of early Christians struggling to explain the Roman world in which they lived. The fallback response to frustration with the present evil age was Christian eschatology, the hope that God in Christ has not finished the work of salvation.

The religious pluralism of West St. Louis was new to me. I was accustomed to being in the majority. Students immediately began to square off in what appeared to be an ongoing debate. When the teacher detected a longstanding battle of religions developing among the students, she called an end to the discussion, thank their guest, and allowed me to escape.

For Christians, questions are permitted. Four decades later I still remember with discomfort my inability to satisfy the simple question of a Jewish teen. It is one of those passages in life that you relive repeatedly, thinking of what you could have said or might have said or should have said. The years have not added to my knowledge or ability to manage cynical questions of faith. I have mellowed a bit and found a new level of comfort, not just with the questions, but with my inability to provide satisfying or ultimate answers—or even a smart response.

I came out of nine years of seminary education with three degrees and a doctorate in theology. I thought that I was supposed to possess the answers. I have gradually learned that the element of uncertainty that resides in faith—agnosticism, if you will—should never be denied or ignored. Unanswered questions are not an embarrassment to the faithful. We live by faith, not certainty. The whole range of biblical history from the first to the last is loaded with more questions than answers. Rather than squirm with discomfort at unsolved problems and difficult questions, we need to embrace the uncertainties as a dimension of faith.

In short, the girl had every right to ask whether Jesus is the Messiah of God; and I needed to embrace my own theological limitations. I had neither the obligation nor the ability to provide final answers. In fact, this Jewish teen may have been my best teacher; she was in good company with early Christians, who regularly wondered about Jesus whom they called Christ.

We wait. The place of John in the Gospels is highly significant to Luke’s birth narratives. John and Jesus are cousins whose births are attributed to acts of God in history. The conception of John to elderly parents, like Abraham and Sarah, rivals the virginal conception of Jesus to a teenage girl named Mary. They share distinct roles in the same mission of God to bring in the reign of God. John comes out of the desert, possibly having lived in the Essene-Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. John hangs out around the Jordan River calling his people to repentance sealed by the sign of baptism. Jesus comes as one of the people, leading in the mission of reform, submitting to the baptism of repentance with everyone else.

We think we know the rest of the story: John must decrease as Jesus must increase. John has served his part of the story. Prison and death under Herod gets John out of the way so that the Gospel story can focus on Jesus. But not so fast! John continued to be a factor. His disciples show up in Acts. Although they become converts to the Jesus movement, they had viewed John's ministry as something final, and his question was still hanging in the air. The story of John in prison is probably a good indication that John was still an issue at the time of Matthew's Gospel.

The scene opens with John on a death watch in prison. He may be bitter; he is certainly jealous for his mission. He has been faithful to his calling. According to the Fourth Gospel John, he has proclaimed "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He has baptized the one whose sandal he was not worthy to loose. Of all people, John had a right to know. He sends his disciples to Jesus with the ultimate question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

This question that grows out of Jewish eschatology. My high school mentor was on target. In John's messianic understanding, reflecting the thinking of most Jews of his time, the Messiah was supposed to bring an end to people like Herod Antipas and his father Herod the Great. The new ruler would *not* be another Herod or Caesar. Messiah would bring in the Kingdom of God, the reign of God over all peoples, all governments, even nature itself. All of the enemy nations would flock to the highway that leads to Jerusalem. As we have read today: "The ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

John was not unfaithful; but his faith was full of questions: Where is the crocus blossoming in the dessert? Where is this perfect world which emerges with Messiah? Where is the promised peace essential to the messianic reign of God? When will the lion lie down with the lamb? Or, we might add the current question: how can we claim that Messiah has come with enormous nuclear bombs stockpiled around the world, and wars in Syria, Israel, and Afghanistan hanging over our heads?

So John asks essentially the same question raised by a teen age girl forty-plus years ago: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus recalled the promises in Isaiah 35 as he sent the messengers back to John to tell what they have seen: "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, Jesus is not finished.

The word of hope and joy in Isaiah 35 are so out of place in context with the preceding text that many scholars believe it was lifted from the Book of Comfort, Isaiah 40-66. If you read chapter 34, you will wonder about the sudden shift from the God of wrath and vengeance to the God of salvation for all the nations of the world.

The vision of hope breaks through prison bars. Jailbirds do not fare so well in polite society. Having a "record" is akin to having leprosy. Anyone with a prison record is likely to be among the unemployed or the underemployed— certainly among the ostracized around here. Yet, we live in a nation that celebrates the birthday of a jailbird, Martin Luther King, Jr., every January. We have learned to distinguish political prisoners from criminals.

Actually John is in good company among Bible characters. In Jewish history, some of the best people were jailbirds. Joseph spent time in an Egyptian prison before becoming the Pharaoh's confidant. Jeremiah was a political prisoner for speaking truth to power. Jesus warned his disciples: "they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name." Peter and John were arrested after Pentecost, and early church leaders were constantly in and out of jails. A group of Paul's letters is even labeled "Prison Epistles," written while he was under arrest.

Since his death on December 5, all of us have been exposed to the story of Nelson Mandela. This well-educated lawyer, native South African, could not sit still while his people suffered under the "apartheid" policies of the white ruling party. He became the leader of a revolution, condemning the injustice, speaking to arouse rebellion, then disappearing into the invisible, black ghettos. He was arrested in 1962 and sentenced to five years in prison for illegally leaving the country and inciting workers to strike. He was tried again in 1963 along with several colleagues for sabotage with the possibility of a death sentence. He was sentenced to life in prison and spent the next twenty-seven

years in a tiny cell at night, working at hard labor during the day

Mandela was another John left to rot in prison with his only remaining view of the world through prison bars. He dared to dream of a racially integrated, just South Africa and refused to give up his dreams in exchange for release. You know the story. Released from prison, Mandela was elected president and led the country in the disposal of apartheid policies of racial subjugation of native Africans. If you have followed the events of the past few days, you must be amazed at this ex-prisoner whose funeral attracted 100 heads of state and whose revolutionary ideas and egalitarian philosophy strongly influenced our own president.

I strongly suspect that Mandela was just the kind of messiah that John and most of his oppressed kin envisioned. Here was a man who inspired leaders around the globe and accomplished without bloodshed far more than he or any other dreamer would have had the right to hope. Yet, the news media warns of continued unrest with the economic inequality in South Africa and poses fear that the armed revolution is still on the horizon. Somehow the prisons never quite go away. Early Christians remembered the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, citing Isaiah 61: Jesus came to set prisoners free—but not John. John languishes in prison until his untimely death at the hands of Herod Antipas, and John's questions linger in the air as if they were raised yesterday. Frederick Niedner observes that Jesus would go as a sheep among the wolves, straight into prison. There he would die, just as John had done before him (*Christian Century*, Nov. 30, 2004, p. 19).