

Are You the One?
Matthew 11:2-11

If you have not made your annual visit to the mall, the toy store, and other shrines of the season, you had better hurry. Christmas is fast approaching, and you don't have much time left. Don't forget the grocery store either. Here you will find all the goodies you so desperately need for all those parties you will be hosting.

All of this shopping means you will also be spending a great deal of time waiting. I am convinced that there is a conspiracy among merchants to make us wait. In some of the larger discount stores you may find as many as 20 check out registers, lined up at the front of the store, but every time I go, there are only 3 or 4 of the checkouts open, and it seems all of them have long lines. I usually choose the shortest line, but it often turns out to be the slowest line. Something always goes wrong in the line I choose. Maybe tis sort of thing happens to you as well. If it does, remember this is the Christmas season, so let's be happy as we stand in those long line. Be patient and don't grumble, the book of James tells us. Easy to say; hard to do.

This time of the year brings the paradoxical combination of rush, rush, rush, and wait, wait, wait. No wonder the true meaning of Christmas is often lost in the chaos.

We have these ideal visions of the season: families coming together, singing Christmas carols, full churches, love and happiness everywhere, but it rarely works out that way. Real life is not what we see depicted in greeting card commercials. When the often-grim reality of life collides with our idealistic visions we can easily be left with a sense of emptiness and a great many questions.

Some of these questions may be troubling. We are told that the child born in Bethlehem came as the Prince of Peace. He was born to usher in the kingdom of heaven, but the world is still not a friendly place. If the kingdom really is here, where is it? Has the coming of Christ changed anything? Before Jesus there was famine, sickness, and violence. After Jesus there is famine, sickness, and violence.

Taken as a whole, humanity may be a bit more civilized than it was 2000 years ago, but our basic nature seems to have remained untouched. We are still selfish, prideful and hostile toward those who are different. In Jesus brought in a new era, where is it?

These same hard questions came into the mind of John the Baptist. John was the forerunner of this new era. John was the first person to declare the arrival of the kingdom. John said it before Jesus! John said other things too, "The axe is lying at the foot of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is thrown into the fire. The wheat and the chaff will be separated, and the chaff will burn with unquenchable fire."

John envisioned a mighty and powerful Messiah come to sweep away all the wickedness of the world and destroy evil. Jesus will set the world straight. Justice and righteousness will rule the day. The oppressed will be liberated, and the hungry will be fed. Those who resist, those who do not believe, those who continue to sin, they will be swept away and cast into the fire. That's what John expected. That's what John proclaimed. That's what drew crowds to hear his message and be baptized. Then Jesus arrived on the scene. John stepped aside and essentially said, "Jesus, you go for it! Bring in the kingdom! Wipe out the old age and bring in the new!" And nothing happened.

Jesus didn't throw anybody into unquenchable fire. He didn't wipe out sinners; he visited in their homes and ate with them! John found himself not living in the new era but imprisoned in a very old-world dungeon with many doubts and questions. Sitting in the darkness of Herod's dungeon, John knew he may not have long to live. He doesn't want to die still wondering about the Messiah, so he sends word to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to look for another?" It is a sad question. It is a question that pleads for an answer. "Are you who I thought you were? Are you the Messiah, or should I wait for someone else?"

John's question may be our question as well. Only our question is compounded by two thousand years of injustice, suffering, disease, abuse, exploitation, and death. Is this really the new world of Jesus Christ, or is there something more?

Perhaps John's questioning and ours is due to a lack of patience. Ours is an era of fast food, instant coffee and microwave dinners. We know what we want, and we want it now. God's timetable seems a bit slower than ours. The letter of James tells us to be patient. You can't plant a seed one day and harvest the crop the next day. That's a message we need to hear.

We all need more patience, but even patience has its limits. In the face of agonizing questions and disappointed expectancy, to simply say, "be patient" can be an all too glib response. "Are you the one, or shall we wait for another?" In response to John's probing question Jesus suggests an examination of current events. The lame walk; the blind can see; lepers are cleansed; the deaf hear; the poor are given good news.

Jesus invites John, and all of us, to consider the positive happenings in the world. Our natural tendency is to ask, "Why is there so much suffering in the world?" Jesus wants us to ask another question: "why is there so much good in the world." How do we account for good health, prosperity, and salvation? In every decade the world becomes aware that many people in the world suffer from a lack of food. That is not new. Starvation has always been a threat somewhere in the world. But through caring people like you the ELCA and Church World Service and Catholic Charities and other denominational bodies have gathered food and sustained the hunger of many people. We are not yet beating our swords into plowshares, but there is good happening in the world. How do we account for that? How do we account for care, compassion and concern?

When it comes to our personal experience of life, how do we account for our own health and when they occur, for amazing recoveries from illness? How do we explain unexpected good fortune? How do we account for the love and support of friends?

Is it wrong to think that the good aspects of life are bits and pieces of the kingdom of Heaven? A kingdom that comes, not by force, but by the birth of a child who came to life in a barn located in the back lot of an inn. The kingdom of Heaven was present in that common yet extraordinary birth. The Kingdom of heaven is within each of us as well. Every time we reach out with love, care, compassion the kingdom grows larger and larger and is that much closer to becoming fully realized.

If you are as old as I am, and a lot of you are, you'll remember that the Pittsburgh Pirates used to have an announcer named Bob Prince. His trademark was that at the end of every game the Pirates won, he would say, "We had 'em all the way!" Even if the pirates had been down at some point in the game by eight runs, he would still say, "We had 'em all the way!" That is what joy gives us the ability to say. Even if we look at our lives and see that we're down by eight runs, and even if it's the bottom of the ninth, joy gives us confidence that in time God is going to make things work out.