

Have you ever been excited for something, really excited, so excited that you just couldn't wait for the thing to happen? Like Christmas morning and your birthday all rolled into one? Seeing an anticipated movie, or meeting a celebrity you've always wanted to meet, or eat at a famous restaurant? We have these experiences in childhood a lot, I think, just because we haven't experienced as much in the world; still, even as adults we have times like these. Times of anticipation. Like the ketchup commercial that used a Carly Simon song to illustrate the idea of waiting for something that you just knew it was going to be delicious. Perhaps a friend has recommended a book, was excited to have you read it, built it up so much that you thought, I just have to get a copy!

We've all had these times, I'm sure, and sometimes the experience matches the expectation and find to our joy and happiness that the thing was worth waiting for. But sometimes the experience doesn't match the expectation. Ever had that happen? The movie we waited all year for didn't live up to the hype, the restaurant we went to celebrate our anniversary was only average. The blind date was a disaster. A move to a new city or a new job or a trip that we hope will be life-changing leaves us cold.

Last week we heard John the Baptist at his John the Baptist best: *I baptize you with water*, he said to the crowds; *but someone else is coming, someone who will baptize with fire, will separate the righteous from the unrighteous like wheat that is kept from chaff that is burned*. At the beginning of John's ministry many people thought that John might be the Messiah, but even he denied this saying someone else was coming. We might remember at this point the story of when Mary visited Elizabeth while they were both pregnant and John leapt with joy in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. And later, when Jesus shows up at the Jordan to be baptized by John he is recognized as the greater one by John, who almost doesn't want to baptize him. It is clear at this point, anyway, that John expects his cousin Jesus to be the one who is to come.

So we might be surprised to hear today the question that John sends his disciples to ask Jesus: *Are you the one to come, or should we wait for another?* A poignant question coming from someone so full of fiery expectation and certainty of what would happen when "the one" finally appeared.

John asks this question from prison where he is being held after being arrested by Herod. If we read the first verse of the passage we see that it says that John sent the disciples to Jesus *because he had heard what the Messiah was doing*. Apparently Jesus was doing things that John didn't expect. We see if we look earlier in Matthew that Jesus had healed a paralytic, had been eating with sinners and even invited a tax collector to be a part of his ministry. He brought sight to a blind man and had compassion for the poor because *they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*.

Let's look for a minute at what the expectations for a Messiah likely were: *he would be a descendant of David, gain sovereignty over the land of Israel, gather the Jews there from all over the earth, restore full observance of Torah Law, and bring peace to the whole world*. (from *Jewish Concepts: The Messiah* in the *Jewish Virtual Library*) Jesus, on the other hand, didn't seem to be working too hard to fulfill these expectations.

There John is, in prison, and he isn't seeing what he expected to see. So he sends his disciples with the question: *are you the one to come, or do we wait for another?*

How often do we ask this question ourselves? If we are honest I think we look around this old world sometimes and think, was Jesus really who he said he was? If so, why are things still so bad? Why don't we have world peace and swords beat into plowshares and wolves and lambs lying down together? Why do things like cancer and heart disease and drug addiction and car accidents still happen? By the way, asking questions like this doesn't mean we don't have faith; in fact, to me it takes more courage and faith to face our doubts than to ignore them, to have a blind faith.

Jesus' answer to John's disciples might be unsatisfying, to John and to us as well: *go back 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 returned to life, and the poor have good news brought to them.* Does this answer the question to John's satisfaction? Probably not—Jesus is essentially saying, *look at the evidence and decide for yourself...but see! People are being healed and restored: to their lives, to their relationships, to community with others.*

This, I think is where we find ourselves as well. Like John we have to decide for ourselves—is Jesus the Messiah? And what does that mean in a time that has grown so weary of waiting that we've all but given up. What does Jesus mean, what does our faith mean in a time so far from his life and death, in an "in between", an "already but not yet" time, waiting for the Messiah to return. Our world is still broken, still imperfect, our lives are still broken and imperfect. And yet... and yet the world is filled with beauty and goodness, our lives have moments of joy and happiness. We live in a paradox in which good and bad coexist and we have to decide each day, many times some days, what we're going to place our faith in. As Franciscan friar Richard Rohr writes, "All of life is a 'coincidence of opposites', a collision of opposites." We live with sickness and health. Prosperity and poverty. Love and hate. Life and death. Joy and sorrow.

But when Jesus was crucified he embodied all of the contradictions we live with. He was, in the words of Rohr, hung between a good thief and a bad thief, between heaven and hell; he was a being of both humanity and divinity, a masculine body with a feminine soul. The crucifixion of Christ was both the worst and best event in human history.

And this is how it is that God is found in *all* things, even those things that hurt us, that break our hearts, that expose the sinfulness of humanity. In the death and resurrection of Jesus we find that our purpose isn't to have a perfect life but to grow toward vulnerability and unity with others. Loving relationships with each other reflect the love that God has for us and that is what Jesus came to show. Love means that the blind, lame, deaf, poor and others—the most vulnerable among us—are to be the center of the loving community.

This is what it means that Jesus is the Messiah—that he is the anointed one, sent by God to bring the Good News that God is with us, has always been with us and always will be with us. No matter who we are, no matter what we've done God is with us. Because of Jesus we are able to embody God's loving presence each time we come together for worship and fellowship, each time we meet with our Nicaragua partners to help bring them clean water, each time we cook and serve a meal for Cornerstone, each time we treat our fellow human beings like human beings. Because of Jesus we are a part of something larger than ourselves, we participate in the vast communion of humanity, those we love and who love us, and those we find unlovable and find us unlovable. Moving together toward a moment in which grace takes hold and the kingdom of God becomes fully realized. Amen.