

“Believe Your Eyes”

Matthew 3:13-17; John 1:29-42 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might remember our baptisms and open our lives to your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Last week I briefly mentioned the 4-source JEPD theory of how the Torah – the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures were put together. It helps explain why so many of those ancient passages sound like two people interrupting each other to tell the same story. If you were to look across all four gospels – or honestly, even just within Matthew – you might want to develop a similar theory for the way they tell us about the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus.

In Luke, of course, there's the story of Mary and Elizabeth, which sort of implies John and Jesus are at the very least distant cousins. Matthew is the only one who tells us about John resisting baptizing Jesus, a reluctance that clearly implies he knew who Jesus was. But both Luke and Matthew have John sending messengers a few chapters later to ask Jesus if he's the “one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” The writer of John, as you know, doesn't talk about practical things like baptism, but instead focuses on John's role in testifying to the light. And Mark, with his typical brevity, doesn't address their relationship much at all, just noting that Jesus got baptized.

This “I know it—I think I know it—do I know it” dynamic seems to me like a surprising thing to include in a gospel you’re writing to convince people to come to faith. So often, we think of faith as asking us to believe things we haven’t seen proof of, and indeed, the point of the gospels is to share the stories with those who hadn’t experienced them personally. But this dynamic seems to reveal the early disciples and even Cousin John having trouble believing what was right before their eyes. At first, that doesn’t seem like a very good way to persuade someone toward faith. But the more you think about it, the more you have to admit that it’s a very real thing, to have trouble recognizing what’s right in front of us. Maybe these illustrations of confusion and doubt are actually more effective than simple declarations of certainty could ever be.

I wonder sometimes if we let our circumstances define our identity in ways that make it harder for us to cope when our circumstances inevitably change. Andrew, Philip, Simon Peter – these were men brought up in a tradition that had, for centuries, been waiting for the Messiah to arrive. They were people who waited for the Messiah. They had been taught how to wait and taught the rituals that made that waiting an act of faith. So perhaps it’s not that surprising that they were a bit caught off guard when the wait was over.

If you read this passage from John with a human lens, it’s actually quite amusing. John tells them, two days in a row, that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Son of God, that

is, the Messiah. But once they finally work up the courage to follow him down the street, when he turns and asks “What are you looking for?” – a question that could be engaged on so many levels – what do they say? “Rabbi, where are you staying?” What?! That’s not what they wanted to know! It reminds me of the scene in “Dirty Dancing” when Frances “Baby” Houseman, a guest at a resort in upstate New York sneaks into the staff dance party, but is compelled to lug in a watermelon on the way. When the uber-dreamy dance instructor Johnny Castle asks her what she’s doing there, does she say “I came to dance” or “I wanted to party” or even “I was curious”? No, she says “I carried a watermelon.” Schmawkward!

Were they afraid to hope? Did they really need more proof? Why didn’t Andrew just say “Are you the Messiah?” Were they just tongue-tied because somewhere deep in their hearts, they already knew who he was? Was John’s reluctance to baptize Jesus rooted in a similar sense of overwhelming awe? When you’ve spent your whole life being a person who is waiting for the Messiah, I can only imagine it must require a major mindset shift to realize you’re looking at him.

Jesus doesn’t demand they immediately profess their loyalty; he doesn’t mock them for asking a silly question. He just gently, invitingly says, “Come and see.” And later, when asked again if he’s the One, can they go back and say to John that he’s the one, he prods them into action saying “Go and tell what you see and hear.” Maybe this faith isn’t as much about what we can’t see, as it is about naming what is right before us.

So how does this dynamic apply to us, already baptized, already having professed our faith, some 2000 years later, having to rely on the testimonies of people we've never met, to a Messiah whose context we barely understand? What is happening right in front of us that Jesus is inviting us to "come and see"? What is going on that we are directed to "go and tell" about? How have we allowed our circumstances to define who we are in ways that are limiting our capacity to face the changes that are arriving at an ever-increasing pace?

It is not a surprise if we feel confused and disoriented in this present moment. We are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as people who live in a certain kind of world. We are used to being part of the dominant faith in our country and enjoying a general, if fuzzy, consensus about what that faith is. For most of our lives, it hasn't been that hard to feel like we're following Jesus as faithfully as could be expected. Most of us got baptized so long ago, we haven't spent much time lately pondering what it meant to "die to sin and rise in Christ," as we were lowered into that water and then lifted back up.

It's not as though there haven't been warning signs. It's not that we were completely unaware of the compromises our faith communities and leaders had made with our broader culture. But we were doing the best we could with what we had, trying to live guided by love and generosity and kindness. So it feels a bit shocking to suddenly realize that the stability we assumed was a permanent feature of our world is

crumbling, while our holy scriptures are being used to justify and sanctify the very declarations of war and aggression that are destroying it. We would prefer to turn away, but Jesus says “come and see.” He asks us to believe what is right in front of our eyes, rather than accepting the narratives of empires motivated by greed and hungry for power for power’s sake. We may need to hold still for some time, getting our bearings in a world that is much different than we were used to. Jesus invites us in, offers to let us make those observations and take those measurements through a gospel lens, sitting by his side. It may feel awkward at first; we may ask silly questions. Jesus will give us the time we need to get our breath and let our souls catch up.

But he doesn’t want us to stay there, sitting still. “Go and tell,” he says just a few chapters later. Proclaim how the world can be different because the power of Love is present. Proclaim the transformations that emerge when we approach our neighbors with hospitality instead of suspicion. Proclaim the healing that can take place when victims are believed and perpetrators are brought into accountability. Too often, we think that someone insisting we “see the world as it is” is scolding us for indulging in escapism and demanding that we expose ourselves to constant reports of suffering and destruction. But the truth is, if we truly see what is happening in front of us, we will witness tremendous acts of faithfulness and steadfastness in addition to the repression and violence we prefer to avoid looking at. We will see signs of hope bursting through like crocus blossoms in the snow. We will see people woven into beloved community

by the power of courageous compassion, people who have opened their eyes and ears to the cries of their neighbors. We will see people who have taken risks and made sacrifices because they believe in something bigger than themselves. If we, too, can open our eyes, we will see the path that Christ is setting before us. “Come and see,” he says. “Come and see.”

If we have walked into the waters of baptism, Jesus promises us, that same Holy Spirit will accompany us as we continue to follow him. We may still occasionally be confused by the circumstances the world throws at us, but our calling will be utterly clear: “We will proclaim the gospel of Jesus, called to forgive, to love, and to welcome... for the healing of the nations.” Hallelujah and Amen.