

The Offense of the Incarnation
Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11

“...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 blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Once again, the lectionary is sabotaging the sentiment of the season. Even as chestnuts are roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose and yuletide carols being sung by some choir other than our own, the church marks the third Sunday in Advent with news from John’s prison cell concerning the prophet’s growing doubts about Jesus. It is a story meant to dial down the sentimental carols in our hearts so that we can use our minds to do business with a scandalously particular savior named Jesus.

Last Sunday, you remember, John was in the wilderness baptizing his own followers and telling the crowd: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” In other words, John expected the Lord’s Messiah to reign fire upon those who did not repent. Jesus’ assumption of our repentance in the Jordan River should have been John’s first clue that he was not the sort of Messiah John had in mind. His second clue? When Jesus withdrew to Galilee at the news of John’s arrest, news Jesus received on the first day of his public ministry.

So not until the eleventh chapter do we hear again of John. He is still in prison for questioning Herod’s morals, but now John has come to doubt Jesus’ authenticity. No news about Jesus confronting Rome or Rome’s surrogates. No stories about fiery judgment or an ax laid to the root of false religion. No inkling that Jesus even remembers John is in prison. So he sends his disciples to ask Jesus for assurance that he had not been mistaken, that he had not risked his own neck for nothing.

Had Jesus sent John’s disciples back with words from Isaiah 34 about the day of the Lord’s vengeance and a year of vindication for Zion’s cause, I think John would have been strangely comforted. If he had to die, it would be for a good cause and the right Messiah. Instead Jesus confirms the reports John had already received, citing selective verses of Isaiah 35 and 61: the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame shall leap like a deer, the tongue of the speechless sing for joy; good news brought to the oppressed, comfort to the brokenhearted, liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners. Curiously for John, Jesus fails to mention even in prospect that he has come to bring liberty to the captives or release to the prisoners. Then, as if to add insult to injury, Jesus says, “Tell John, ‘Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.’”

We are not told of John’s response. Of more import for Matthew was the response of his fellow Jews to Jesus: would they be offended or would Matthew’s Gospel bring them around to see Jesus as the true Messiah? And what of you and me? What is our response to the savior we have been given in the words of Scripture and the witness of the church on the third Sunday of Advent? Ironically, if we take no offense, we probably have missed the one who has come to save us from our sin and rescue us from the lives we live without him.

At the outset, it might help to notice that the things we hope for in our culture are very different from the hopes of John’s disciples or Matthew’s community. You and I live and move and do our believing in a sea of so-called spirituality that prefers vague abstractions to specific saviors: peace, joy, love, happiness. I was going to add justice, but justice feels a little too edgy these days in mixed company. We gravitate toward figures who make us feel good about ourselves. We like to keep our religion, especially this time of year, as sentimental as possible. Hence chestnuts roasting on the open fire, Jack Frost nipping at our noses, yuletide carols being sung by the choir and a used Lexus in the driveway with a bow on top all come closer to the Christmas spirit we are after than Jesus and John in Matthew’s Gospel.

But now on this Sunday, our vague hopes as well as John’s fiery expectations have come up against the incarnation. God become human, specifically human in the person of Jesus. Seen in its best light, the incarnation sets us free “from the ‘god’ of our speculations and dreams, from projecting onto infinity our own thoughts, which we once called ‘God’ while they were not God at all. Now and only now,” Karl Barth told a German radio audience in December of 1933, “God has become God *for us* because by becoming... this particular man Jesus, he took from us the senseless freedom to make him after our own image.” Yet that is also the scandal of the incarnation. We can no longer make God mean anything that we please. Put another way by Duke chaplain Will Willimon, in Jesus we are given about as much of God as we can take. “Go tell John what you hear and see,” Jesus says. “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.”

What in the world could be offensive about that? It was what Jesus’ hometown congregation thought the first time he stood up to preach and opened the scroll to Isaiah 61. Willimon imagines people turning to one another at the end of Jesus’ sermon saying, “Lovely! We are in for a rebirth of spirituality in the nation!” Then Jesus gets specific, says in particular that the recipients of God’s great good news were to be found outside this congregation’s respectable, hard-working, Torah-keeping, well-deserving circle of like-minded believers. Specifically they were foreigners and mothers on welfare according to Jesus in Luke 4. In an instant, “lovely” became “lynch him” and he disappeared off a cliff, like a scapegoat bearing the people’s sins away.

I hate to say this, but the offense of the incarnation, then and now, appears to be political. In Matthew’s time, John and his disciples were offended because Jesus was not political enough; today, judging Jesus by our disembodied spirituality, we are offended because his gospel is too political. However, from the beginning and not by chance, it was the politically powerful who understood *the nature of the threat* posed by Jesus. In the words of W. H. Auden’s Herod, “Why couldn’t this wretched infant be born somewhere else? Why can’t people be sensible? I don’t want to be horrid. Why can’t they see that the notion of a finite God is absurd? Because it is. And suppose, just for the sake of argument, that it isn’t, that this story is true, that this child is in some inexplicable manner both God and Man...for me personally at this moment it would mean that God has given me the power to destroy himself.” That is to say, the threat Jesus poses to all whose power is the power of life and death over other human beings is just this: in his death on a cross he will take that power from them forever. When he is raised, death will have no dominion and neither will they. Herod understood this and quickly ordered the slaughter of Bethlehem’s baby boys and so the destruction of the child born to unmask his power as pretense.

Although, as Willimon put it, the problem is not that God became a baby but that God grew up to be Jesus and Jesus became so unavoidably, specifically, particularly God-with-us that it would fall to Herod’s successor finally to destroy this God. Yet notice how the offense of the Incarnation (emphasis on the second syllable) has become the offense of the Incarnation (emphasis on the first—thank you Harry Spaeth!!!), and what a strange offense God mounts. “With tears he fights and wins the field,” our choir will sing on Christmas Eve. “His naked breast stands for a shield;/His battering shot are babish cries,/His arrows looks of weeping eyes,/His martial ensigns Cold and Need,/And feeble flesh his warrior’s steed.” God’s Son has come into the world to take over the territory that death presently occupies by dying. The enemy that is not this or that particular politician; is not this or that religion’s take on the moral law; is not this or that movement or ideology, but is death in all of death’s manifestations. The decay of our bodies, the disquiet of our souls, the dementia of our minds, the disorder of our common life, the despotism and demagoguery of our rulers, the desecration of our planet, the demise of human decency: God in Christ assumes the death we must die so that neither death nor life can separate us from the love for which we were made.

Therefore, if you want to get in the true spirit of Christmas, begin with Good Friday and Easter, Willimon says, because if “you begin with the baby Jesus before the crucified Christ, you end up with inconsequential sentimentality.”

Now paradoxically, this Sunday in Advent is known traditionally as Gaudete Sunday, Rejoice Sunday, when penitential practices are set aside in favor of the anticipated joy of Christ’s coming again. I would be remiss if I did not also mention that John the Baptist is the patron saint of spiritual joy. Really! He leapt in his mother’s womb when pregnant Mary came to visit; he said in Jesus’ coming that his joy was now complete. Yet his life ended in senseless tragedy like the lives of the children and teachers of Sandy Hook we remember on the lawn of this church today.

“Maybe John understood something hard and flinty about joy,” essayist Debie Thomas imagines. “Joy in a prison cell is not about sentimentality or happiness. Or pious suppression of our own most painful crises and questions. Maybe he understood that joy is what happens when we dare to believe that our Messiah disillusion us for nothing less than our salvation, stripping away every lofty expectation we cling to so that we can know God for who God really is.” Maybe John understood only when Herod’s knife came down upon his neck that Jesus was the one who was born to defeat death’s power over his life and your life and mine.

Is he the one or are you looking for another? Blessed is the one whose hard and flinty joy at the foot of the cross has readied her to rejoice in the love who came down at Christmas.