

Psalm 146:5-10

⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;
⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!

Matthew 11:2-19

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the 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. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵Let anyone with ears listen!

¹⁶“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

SmackDown Jesus!

December 11, 2016 Advent 3

“There was once a woman who was disappointed, who was disillusioned, who was depressed. She wanted a good world, a peaceful world, and she wanted to be a good person. But the newspaper and television showed her how far we were from such a reality. So, she decided to go shopping. She went to the mall and wandered into a new store - where the person behind the counter looked strangely like Jesus. Gathering up her courage she went up to the counter and asked, "Are you Jesus?" "Well, yes, I am," the man answered. "Do you work here?" she asked. "Actually," Jesus responded, "I own the store. You are free to wander up and down the aisles, see what it is I sell, and then make a list of what you want. When you are finished, come back here, and we'll see what we can do for you."

So, the woman did just that. And what she saw thrilled her. There was peace on earth, no more war, no hunger or poverty, peace in families, no more drugs, harmony, clean air. She wrote furiously and finally approached the counter, handing a long list to Jesus. He skimmed the paper, and then smiling at her said, "No problem." Reaching under the counter, he grabbed some packets and laid them out on the counter. Confused, she asked, "What are these?" Jesus replied: "These are seed packets. You see, this is a catalogue store." Surprised the woman blurted out, "You mean I don't get the finished product?" "No," Jesus gently responded. "This is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like, and I give you the seeds. Then you plant the seeds. You go home and nurture them and help them to grow and someone else reaps the benefits." "Oh," she said, deeply disappointed in Jesus. Then she turned around and left the store without buying anything.¹

Like many in his time, John had a dream of what the Messiah would be like. He'd read the stories and listened to the prophets and he was putting it all on the line for the One who would come and restore his people. But sitting in prison can cause you to have some doubts and so he sends his disciples to ask Jesus a heartfelt question. "Are you the One who is to come, or should we wait for another?"

What a question to ask Jesus, and especially from his cousin John. Why does John have doubts about Jesus? Aren't they on the same team? Haven't they been working towards this since the day he leapt in the womb? Wasn't John convinced after he baptized Jesus and heard God call him his beloved? I'm pretty sure Jesus and John had been discussing this ministry for quite a while, so what gives? What is going on here? Maybe that is the difference between a prophet and a messiah, and John isn't the only one having doubts, as we hear Jesus mention those who are complaining about both of them. Not satisfied with either of them. which I guess begs the question today, "what kind of Messiah are you looking for?" That's the real question today and the one that John and even his disciples are struggling with.

You see John is a prophet. He comes from a priestly family. He lives in the wilderness and eats what he can find. He wears rough clothing and there are very few soft edges about this guy. Just couple of chapters ago he was calling sinners to repent! "Turn around and change your ways! And what are you guys doing here, you soft-robed, religious types? You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come! You think God is going to cut you any slack because you have money and act religious? Let me tell you guys, the axe is already laid at the roots of your tree, and God can make children of Abraham out of rocks if you don't get your act together! Bear fruit worthy of repentance!"

John is in your face and unapologetic where the Kingdom is concerned. I like to think of him as the Bernie Sanders of his day. He confronts those in power and calls them to repentance with the new and coming Kingdom of God in mind, which will sweep away all the old powers and restore Israel to her rightful place. He obviously believes that Jesus is going to continue this work after he's been arrested. But guess what? He didn't, at least not the way John thought he would, and maybe that is why John is having doubts. Here he sits in prison

for standing up to Herod, and Jesus and his followers aren't even staging a protest outside the prison. What gives?

And John is not alone in his doubts. Many others were also wondering about this Messiah who eats with sinners and goes to parties and hangs out with those soft-robed-types. I think John was expecting something else. It reminds me of a picture I saw posted last week of Jesus on the cross. But this Jesus was unlike any I'd ever seen. This Jesus was ripped man! He had muscles like a body builder and he was flexing them and tearing that cross to pieces and you got the sense that he was going to come down off that thing and kick some butt. The SmackDown Jesus is what I call him. A Jesus who will come and overthrow the powers that be, destroy all our enemies, rule with unimaginable power, and scare the heck out of everyone. Make the rough places smooth, the mountains low, and send all those corruptible sinners straight to hell. And it's amazing to me the many Christians who actually believe, this is who Jesus is and will be when he comes again.

And I confess there are times when I want this kind of Messiah as well. It must be human nature to push back when pushed, to slap when slapped, to strive for self-righteousness, and win at all costs. We want our teams to trounce their opponents, (just follow those Mitchell High fans on Facebook) and we rejoice when our side and those who believe as we do come out on top.

But Jesus has a different idea it seems because he sends John a message, the same message he sends us. "Look around and tell me what you see? The blind can see again, the lame can walk, lepers are made well, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." This is the way Jesus is doing and living out his Father's love in the world and he hopes that no one is upset about that.

Barbara Brown Taylor shared a beautiful perspective on this by saying that, "John had wanted a tidal wave of a Messiah—someone who would be impossible to miss, who would make a clean sweep of things, who would witness to the omnipotent righteousness of God. What John got instead was a steady drip of mercy from a man named Jesus, in whom plenty of people saw no Messiah at all...If you have one doubt in your mind, then I will tell you the truth. Sometimes I would give anything for one fireball from heaven, one blast of raw power from a tidal wave God who would sweep my and everyone else's doubts away forever. But that is not what I have. What I have instead is a steady drip of mercy from the followers of a man named Jesus, who is still playing doctor to a lot of marginalized people in this world."²

The steady drip of mercy! What a wonderful image and one that resonates deeply as we think about how we bring that mercy into the world. Like nine-year-old Khloe Thompson who passed the same homeless people on her way to school each day. Their sadness and need inspired her to create Khloe Kares, a charity devoted to improving the lives of the dispossessed in her home of Irvine, California. Khloe sews tote bags—called Kare Bags—and fills them with toothpaste, soap, shampoo, and other donated toiletries before handing them out. "Sometimes they give me hugs, says Khloe of the people she has helped. "Sometimes they say, "God bless you."³

Or the hay farmer in the Midwest who had a lucky summer. He grew more fescue than he needed and was trying to decide what to do with it when he heard about an Indian reservation in the next state that had been hit hard by the drought. With no irrigation, the reservation's hay crop had been wiped out and its cows were starving. The farmer loaded up his truck and spent the rest of the week delivering tons of free hay to people who wondered what part of heaven he had dropped out of.²

For 34 years, LouAnn Alexander worked as a flight attendant. But at the age of 58, she received a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. Soon, the vivacious mother of two and grandmother-to-be was making plans for hospice care. Her older brother Rex Ridenoure was flying to see her when he asked the flight attendant who was a

colleague of LouAnn's—if he could speak to the passengers. He talked about his sister, even passed his phone around so they could see photos of her. He then handed out napkins and asked if they'd write a little something for her. Ninety-six passengers responded. Some drew pictures. One man and his seatmate created flowers out of napkins and swizzle sticks. But mostly there were warm words: “Your brother made me love you, and I don't even know you.” LuaAnn died in April but her brother never forgot the compassion that was shown that day. “I'm just amazed that given the opportunity, even total strangers will reach out and show a lot of empathy and concern,” he said.³

In August Cari and Lauri Ryding came home to find their rainbow flag had been stolen and their house egged. Anti-homosexual vandalism wasn't at all what they expected in their close-knit Massachusetts, neighborhood. As it turned out, it also wasn't what their neighbors expected either. “We said, ‘Why don't we all have flags? They can't take them from all of us,’” Denis Gaughan told the Boston Globe. Within days, the rainbow flag—the symbol of gay pride—was flying in solidarity with the Rydings on over 40 other homes in the family-friendly area. “One person's act of fear and maliciousness created such a powerful statement of love,” said Lauri, “Love wins. We Win.”³

John had doubts about Jesus. I hope before he died that he was comforted by Jesus' response and that he took no offence that Jesus was who he said he was. And if we are honest I suppose, we all have doubts and questions about what kind of Messiah Jesus is and will be in our lives. And it is perfectly alright to ask him about that. And I expect that Jesus' answers to that will be the same. “Look around. Wake up. Pay attention. Do you see me in the way that lives are changed? Do you hear me in the voices of those who stand for justice and equality? Do you sense my Spirit in the season of Advent? A Season of Hope and Love. Are you asking the right questions and letting love rule your lives? Will Love win or will something else control you?”

There was a beautiful quote posted this week on one of the Presbyterian sites that I read from Catholic Priest Henri Nouwen who said, “The real questions are these:

Did I offer peace today?

Did I bring a smile to someone's face?

Did I say words of healing?

Did I let go of my anger and resentment?

Did I forgive?

Did I Love?

These are the real questions. And I think this is what Jesus is trying to remind John and all of us, is that this steady drip of God's love can and will change the world. And as we all know, a tiny drip of water or mercy can, over time, wear away the hardest of stone, can turn boulders into sand, can turn a tiny rivulet of water into a raging river. Perhaps this Messiah really is the One who has the power to change the world, to bring Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love to all. Perhaps he really is the SmackDown Jesus after all. What do you think? In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

¹ *A Place of Dreams*. Adapted by Susan R. Andrews, as told in *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, F. and M. Brussat, editors (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 359.

² *The Marginal Messiah*, from the book, *The Seeds of Heaven* by Barbara Brown Taylor

³ *Readers Digest 21 True-Life Stories of Kindness and Generosity* (November 2016)