



ENTERING THE SCENE:

Three candles. We are getting closer to the climax of the waiting season. Times like these are difficult. We desperately need something new to break into our lives and give them that something more we long for. But it is also an anxious time. Birthing is never pain free, safe or easy. The opening for the new to be born stretches and challenges us. John needs his understanding of what a Messiah is to be stretched in our reading today. Jesus sends John his understanding of what God's Messiah is to be. Now we have to answer this question as well: What then do we go out to see?

Mt. 11:2-11

2 When **John** heard in **prison** what the **Messiah** was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "**Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?**" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell **John** what you **hear and see:** 5 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. 6 And blessed is anyone who **takes no offense** at me." 7 As 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?" 8 What then did you **go out to see?** A **prophet?** 10 This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my **messenger** ahead of you, who will **prepare your way** before you.' 11 Truly 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."

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Jesus asked John and now asks us what we are looking for in God's Messiah. How do I answer his question this year?

PRAYER: If there is no Cross in the Manger

If there is no cross in the manger, there is no Christmas. If the Babe doesn't become the Adult, there is no Bethlehem star. If there is no commitment in us, there are no Wise Men searching. If we offer no cup of cold water, there is no gold, no frankincense, no myrrh. If there is no praising God's name, there are no angels singing. If there is no spirit of alleluia, there are no shepherds watching. If there is no standing up, no speaking out, no risk, there is no Herod, no flight into Egypt. If there is no room in our inn, then "Merry Christmas" mocks the Christ Child, and the Holy Family is just a holiday card, and God will loathe our feasts and festivals.

For if there is no reconciliation, we cannot call Christ "Prince of Peace." If there is no goodwill toward others, it can all be packed away in boxes for another year. If there is no forgiveness in us, there is no cause for celebration. If we cannot go now even unto Golgotha, there is no Christmas in us. If Christmas is not now, if Christ is not born into the everyday present, then what is all the noise about? Weems, Ann. [Kneeling in Bethlehem](#). Philadelphia. Westminster Press. 1980. **THE CROSS IN THE MANGER** : Page 77.

WORD STUDY AND QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:



JOHN THE BAPTIST: Once again we meet John the Baptist. Although it is almost mid-way into Matthew's gospel, we find John not as sure as he used to be about who Jesus is.

Does it surprise me that John is now questioning the truth that he so confidently proclaimed before Jesus' baptism? Have I ever lost confidence in the strength of my faith?

PRISON: As John awaits his death in prison, we find him sending back his doubts by way of his disciples.

Do I have any doubts that imprison me in my search for God in my life? What are they?

MESSIAH: John's idea of Messiah involves wrath and judgment.

How does John's idea get in the way of seeing who Jesus is? Do I have the same difficulty?

ARE YOU THE ONE WHO IS TO COME?: Each year we enter into Advent carrying John's question in our hearts.
In what ways am I asking this question this Advent?

ARE WE TO WAIT FOR ANOTHER?: Sometimes, like John, we have ideas about God's Messiah that get in the way of seeing what is in front of us.
Whose ideas of Messiah am I most comfortable with; John's or Jesus? Why?

HEAR / SEE: Jesus responds to John's question by asking him to reflect on what he has heard and seen. Over and over again we find the challenge to look and listen.
What have I heard or seen this Advent that helps me to deepen my faith life this past year?

BLIND / LAME / LEPERS / DEAF / DEAD / POOR: The age-old question of; "why do bad things happen to good people" is the lament of John and John's people. If God is good, then how come we have all this human misery?
Has anything happened this year to push me to this kind of question? Was I able to reconcile whatever that was with my understanding of God in my life?

SIGHT / WALK / CLEANSED / HEAR / RAISED / GOOD NEWS: Is. 61:1-3 is Jesus' text as he sends back word to John in prison.
Are these the kinds of things I look for when I am searching for God?

TAKES NO OFFENSE: Earlier, in Mt. 5:3f, we find Jesus' teaching about God's kingdom. In verse 11, we are prepared ahead of time to expect insults, slander and persecution. In other translations we find the words, stumbling block instead of offense.
Does John question become a stumbling block for me?

GO OUT TO SEE: People were leaving Jerusalem and the usual places that promised an experience of God in order to find something more.
How have I gone out to see this Advent? Where do I go? Have I found new promise in any unexpected places?

WILDERNESS / REED: A wilderness with reeds is an unlikely place to find royalty. A cave or manger helps to bring us to the real site of Christmas.
Has my Advent include any wilderness? Caves? Reeds?

SOFT ROBES / ROYAL PALACES: Royal palaces and soft robes sound more like royalty.
Does the soft cuddly overtones of Christmas, tempt me to look for soft robes and palaces? How do I overcome this temptation?

PROPHET / MESSENGER / PREPARE YOUR WAY: Historically, the prophet's role is to be a messenger for God who is to help prepare the people to receive God's revelation.
Is there anyone serving the role of John in my faith life these days? Do I play that role for others? How?

LEAST / GREATER: Lest the people ignore the importance of John now that Jesus is taking the lead role, Jesus once again proclaims the great role that John is to play in creation history.
Does John's question help me to go deeper into God's revelation this Advent? How?

PARALLEL TEXTS: Mt. 11:2-11// Lk. 7: 18-28; **Mt. 11:5** // Mt. 8:3f; Is. 26:19, 29; 18f; 35:5f; Lk. 4:18; Lk. 7:22; **Mt.11: 7** // Mt. 3:3f; **Mt. 11: 10** // Mal. 3:1; Mk. 1:2; Lk. 1:76f; 7:27;

OTHER TEXTS OF THE WEEK: Is. 35:1-6, 10; Ps. 146:6-10; James 5:7-10; Mt. 11: 2-11; Revised Common Lectionary: Is. 35: 1-10; Lk. 1:47-55; James 5:7-10; Mt. 11: 2-11;

SUPPORTIVE INFORMATION:

To a preacher who kept saying, "We must put God in our lives," the Master said, "He is already there. Our business is to recognize this." - Anthony de Mello, One Minute Wisdom

You have surely noticed that when a question is vital – when it takes us in the guts, as you say – it suspends all unnecessary movements, emotional and physical as well as mental. It clears the way for real awareness and sensitivity; which are components of

my total power of attention. It is only between my not knowing and my urge to know that I find myself present, mobilized, open, new – that is to say, attentive. *De Sallzmann, Michael. Awaken to the Question. Parabola. Spring 2002 pages 54ff.*

Against the power of the blade, Jesus places the power of healing. Against the hard, uncompromising demands of repentance, Jesus places the hard, punishing task of reconciliation. John's word is true, but it is unfinished. Repentance should lead to reconciliation, not entrenched division. Often we stop at John's image of God, a God with thunderbolts at his fingertips. But the power of love is stronger than the power of destruction. Whether we really believe this, or merely give it lip service, is a question. We are tempted to preach love - until we can get our hands on some real power.' Humm. But that is next week. Neither here nor anywhere else in the Gospel does Jesus make an explicit claim to Messiahship. Here he simply returns a word on what he has been doing – which John knew already. But the emphasis and language evoke the Isaiah words about the new age. Jesus, in effect, claims for his approach scriptural credential on a par with John's "Day of the Lord." John would need to adjust to the surprising fulfillment. (Nor is this his only surprise. In citing Isa. 61, Jesus stresses "good news to the poor" and passes over "release of prisoners." I wonder what John thought of this, as he sat in prison. And, despite his differences, Jesus followed John to prison and death.)

Beck, Fr. Robert. Sunday's Word. The Witness. Dec. 11, 1980. Page 5

Matthew omits "freeing the captives" (Is. 61:1). Jesus may avoid answering directly since a report to John in prison saying "I am the Messiah" would be heard by Herod's guards, and could lead to Jesus' arrest as well. Pg. 21.

Levine, Amy-Jill & Brettler, Marc Zvi. The Jewish Annotated New Testament. NY. Oxford Univ. Press. 2011

When you awaken to the eternal nature of the Ground of all Being, you find that there is something miraculously and mysteriously compelling about it. It's like staring at a candle in a dark night—you find yourself mesmerized by something that is unchanging yet infinitely compelling. You feel that you are being drawn into something that you can't rationally understand but that your heart or your soul understands completely. You're being drawn into it, and as you are drawn into it, the only thing you experience as being real is the eternal or timeless nature of Being Itself. You find yourself in a state of rapture. Why? Simply because a deeper part of yourself has been released from your ego's endless fears and concerns, and drawn out of the time process altogether. Andrew Cohen

We see the contrast between the two positions (of John and Jesus) stated in terms of deserts and gardens. Where John would hew, Jesus plants. Again, we see the theme of healing supplementing John's initial proclamation of the kingdom coming. Pgs. 149-50. After the question John directs from prison, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" (11:3), Jesus discusses the difference between them. The evangelist inserts at this point a verse that reflects the tension between the two apparently incompatible positions more than it resolves is: From the days of John the Baptist till now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent plunder it" (Matt 22:12). Pg. 159. Beck Robert. Banished Messiah. Eugene, OR. Wipf & Stock. 2010/

If I am to know the will of God, I must have the right attitude toward life. I must first of all know what life is, and to know the purpose of my existence. It is all very well to declare that I exist in order to save my soul and give glory to God by doing so. And it is all very well to say that, in order to do this, I obey certain commandments and keep certain counsels. Yet knowing this much, and indeed knowing all moral theology and ethics and canon law, I might still go through life conforming myself to certain indications of God's will without ever fully giving myself to God. For that, in the last analysis, is the real meaning of His will. He does not need our sacrifices, He asks for ourselves. And if He prescribes certain acts of obedience, it is not because obedience is the beginning and the end of everything. It is only the beginning. Charity, divine union, transformation in Christ: these are the end. Pg. 63.

Merton, Thomas. No Man is an Island, Harvest/HBJ Book, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, 1955

Only when we have made ourselves deeply aware of who we have been, and why we are the way we are, will the thrilling and miraculous potential of who we *could* be enter into the light of consciousness. Andrew Cohen

Mt. 11:11 // [Gosp. of Thomas Logion 46](#): Jesus said, "From Adam to John the Baptist, no one born of woman is greater than John the Baptist, so that his eyes will not (...) . But I have said that anyone among you who becomes as a child will know the kingdom, and will become greater than John."

"I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. Life is no brief candle for me. It is a sort of splendid torch, which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations." --George Bernard Shaw

Hope is that sonar by which the body of Christ holds together and finds its way. If we, as living members of the body of Christ, can surrender our hearts, re-enter righteousness, and listen for that sonar with all we are worth, it will again guide us, both individually and corporately, to the future for which we are intended. And the body of Christ will live, and thrive, and hold us tenderly in belonging. Cynthia Bourgeault. [Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God](#).

"The Gospels are the top of the mountain of which the other biblical writings form the slopes." Vincent van Gogh

"Even a thought, even a possibility, can shatter us and transform us." Friedrich Nietzsche

The purpose of the fish trap is to catch fish, and when the fish are caught, the trap is forgotten. The purpose of a rabbit snare is to catch rabbits, when the rabbits are caught, the snare is forgotten. The purpose of words is to convey ideas, when the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten. Where can I find a person who has forgotten words? That is the one I would like to talk to. Chang Tzu

“One’s mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions.” Oliver Wendell Holmes

The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire. [Teilhard de Chardin](#)

Everyone takes the limits of his own vision for the limits of the world. Arthur Schoepenhauer

It’s hard to see the whole picture when you are inside the frame. Fr. Ralph Powell

The most critical discernment skill is being able to distinguish between the sound of integrity and the sound of its absence. M. Scott Peck

I can light a candle because I need the light, or because the candle represents the light I need. Christina Baldwin

One of the shining qualities that heroes possess is the willingness to be educated by all things. Gregg Levoy

It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work, and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings. Wendell Berry

Power tends to win in the struggle between power and love; love tends to have the last word. Gregg Levoy

In a book [The Time of Miracles](#) the author weaves stories that imagine the lives of the people who have been changed by their miracle. Sometimes he has the person wishing that the miracle never happened, such as when a dumb man is given the power to speak, but when he speaks his mind, he is crucified. [Pekic, Borislav. The Time For Miracles, NY. Harcourt Brace Jovanovick, Inc. 1976.](#)

[In an Essene document \(4Q521\)](#) we find “He who liberates the captives, restores sight to the blind, straightens the bent...will heal the wounded and *revive the dead*, and bring good news to the poor” we find echoes of Matthew’s gospel of today. This suggests that a hope that the Messiah would be such a person precedes Jesus. Isaiah 35: 5-6 and 61:1 make no mention of raising the dead. Some scholars suggest that John the Baptist, born of aged parents may have been orphaned as a youth. The Essene community made a practice of “adopting” such boys and raising them. They further suggest that eventually John broke from their exclusiveness and went out on his own in the desert.

More than just a moral issue, hope is a spiritual and even religious choice. Hope is not a feeling; it is a decision. And the decision for hope is based upon what you believe at the deepest levels - what your most basic convictions are about the world and what the future holds - all based upon your faith. You choose hope, not as a naive wish, but as a choice, with your eyes wide open to the reality of the world - just like the cynics who have not made the decision for hope. ...The antidote to cynicism is not optimism but action. And action is finally born out of hope. Jim Wallis

Behold, with heartfelt and deep sorrow, in what great ignorance of God everyone remains! Ignatius Loyola

Realization is not something we can do; it’s only something we can be ready for. Zenkai Blanche Hartman

There is something that can only be found in one place. It is a great treasure, which may be called the fulfillment of Existence. The place this treasure can be found is the place on which one stands. Martin Buber

“Holy One, how shall I know the difference between knowledge and enlightenment?” The Holy One said” When you have knowledge, you light a torch to find your way. When you have enlightenment you become a torch to show the way.” Zen saying

Jesus came in the fullness of time. He will come again in the fullness of time. Wherever Jesus, the Christ, is the time is brought to its fullness. We often experience our time as empty. We hope that tomorrow, next week, next month or next year the real things will happen. But sometimes we experience the fullness of time. That is when it seems that time stands still, that past, present, and future become one; that everything is present where we are; and that God, we, and all that is have come together in total unity. This is the experience of God's time. "When the completion of the time came [that is: in the fullness of time], God sent his Son, born of a woman" ([Galatians 4:4](#)), and in the fullness of time God will "bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth" ([Ephesians 1:10](#)). It is in the fullness of time that we meet God. Henri Nouwen

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Links to all the books mentioned in this guide are on The Ark web site: www.theark1.com

Beck, Robert. Sunday Homilies: Cycle A 2008. Pgs. To order contact [Carol Oberfoel](#)

Beck, Robert. Sunday Homilies: Cycle A 2011. Pgs. To order contact [Carol Oberfoel](#)