

The Third Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2016

“Really?”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 35:1-10 ~ Matthew 11:2-11

In most action movies there is a classic scene that is so often repeated that it has become a cinematic cliché. Normally, somewhere towards the end of the movie, the good guys finally catch up with the bad guys. The bad guys are holed-up in a large rusty abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of town. They are either working out the final details of their diabolical plan or they are deciding what to do with the captives that they have taken ...but no longer need ... or sometimes they are doing both simultaneously. But even as they scheme away, they are unaware that currently the good guys have made their appearance.

The good guys first, of course, make sure that this is the hide out ... that this is the place they are looking for. And once they've confirmed that this is the place ... then the plan comes into play. Typically, they gather behind a stack of pallets outside of the bad guys' hideout ... and then someone will ask, "What's the plan?" The cool good guy will say something like this. "I'll go around back. You come in from the front. But don't make a move until I give you the sign." Then someone has to ask the next question, "What will the sign be?" And the cool good guy always answers, "Oh, you'll know." Then he disappears around the side of the building.

Eventually, as the group waits, something blows up or our hero drives through the side of building in a borrowed cement truck at which point everyone knows ... THAT was the awaited sign, and they all go into action.

I think these scenes are so popular in movies because there is a clarity to them that is comforting. We don't know, as the person watching the movie, what the sign for action will be ... but we all know that we will undeniably recognize it when it finally happens.

Unfortunately, life is almost never so clear. We await signs that will give us affirmation or clarity as to what we should do with our lives. As a matter of fact, in the life of every believer there is a moment ... and normally not just a single moment ... but sometimes reoccurring moments. It is a moment of question. We have been living our lives as faithfully as we can. We aren't perfect, but we strive to be faithful ... and we are on the lookout for God at work in our lives. We want a sign ... a nice, clear, obvious sign of God's approval ... something that is unmistakable to let us know we're on the right path. But instead of winning the lottery or some sort of tangible blessing that we have been seeking, suddenly the wheels come off the bus. We are stunned to discover that we are laid off from our job or that our child is seriously ill ... perhaps our house burns down ... or any number of other calamities appear ... and our life is suddenly filled with looming darkness and uncertainty.

When our daughter Mary Cate, was in high school, she had a one word question she used frequently. That one word question was, "Really?" It was normally said when life or a friend suddenly foists upon her some turn of events that seemed woefully unfair given all the hardship

that she already had to bear. She used it most often when she already had a lousy, long day of school ... perhaps in the midst of a painful breakup with her boyfriend du jour ... and then as she walked in the front door, I would ask her please to empty the dish washer or take out the trash. "Really?" The question was intended to ask, in the midst of all I have going on, is that really what you want to do or ask. Is that really your intended plan?

In our gospel passage today, we find John the Baptist asking that same question, and from a strange place. He in prison with his life hanging in the balance because he has dared to confront powerful King Herod. The bold prophet whose important announcements we heard last week is also in the dumps. Last week he was so certain. This week he is filled with doubts. Last week people were coming to him ... way out in the wilderness ... to hear the news. Now, he's lost and he's alone. He's confused and he's frustrated. He has looked for the big unmistakable sign that the coming good guy would bring, but he hasn't seen one. Instead, he sees Jesus. Jesus is teaching and preaching, but the world is not transforming in the way that John had expected.

So he asked the question. Now we can be sure that John had asked the question in prayer to God multiple times from prison ... but we also have it written down in the Gospel of Matthew that he had his disciples ask Jesus, "Really?" Is this really the plan? Is this it? Are YOU the one? Really?

Okay, not exactly in those words, but that was the question. Really, are YOU the one I have been looking for? Is this it? Or are we to wait for another?

He is really asking, "Are you going to do what I expected, or was I wrong about you? Has my life counted for nothing after all?" It turns out, that John's faith is also imprisoned, locked up in the expectations by which he has sought to contain God. And this paralyzed, imprisoned faith is a greater torture to John the Baptist than anything Herod could devise.

We ask the same questions from time to time, don't we, when Christ doesn't come through as we expect? When life makes us stop and sit still ... face our mortality, deal with our demons ... admit our idols? Disillusionment is the product of illusion. Perhaps you've known moments of such breathtaking beauty or profound love or even frightening helplessness that you could almost feel God's breath on your face, and you knew God was as close to you as your heartbeat. But at other times ... perhaps even for long spells of time ... God seems as far away as Pluto and your prayers dissipate like smoke from a candle into nothingness. Maybe the organized church has disappointed you ... and nobody has the answers you want ... so doubts begin to flood your mind. But it's not really the intellectual doubts that bother you so much as the hard life experiences that shake your faith. They just don't match what you expect from God.

I once heard about a debate between atheist Madeline Murray O'Hare and Harvard Theologian Harvey Cox where Cox asked her to describe the God she didn't believe in, and when she did, Cox said, "Well, I don't believe in that God either!" And I don't believe in the God I've heard a lot of preachers describe, either...the hateful One...the spiteful One...the automatic wish fulfilling One. But I do believe in God, and I am still doing research on who God is and what God is like. We are all theologians in this regard. We have the testimony of those who have gone before us contained in the scripture. We have the witness of those around us in the beloved community, the church. But finally we must turn to the laboratory of our own lives to discover what is congruent with our own experience and what is incongruent in regard to the God we have

heard so much about. The scripture gives us a vocabulary. The teaching of the church gives us a head start in knowing where to look and the kind of things to expect, but what finally matters is your own personal experience. I don't mean that you approach God with a "what-have-you-done-for-me-lately" attitude ... or that you make yourself the standard by which to measure the Almighty. If religion does anything right, it ought to cure us of the narcissism so rampant in our post-modern moment. The most important message of the church to our time may just be, "Get over yourself. It isn't about you. So don't be disappointed if God isn't the personal guardian of your happiness."

But the question remains. Is God near or far away? Is God approachable or forever beyond us? Is Jesus the One ... or have our lives been wasted after all in trusting him?

Jesus' answer to John is an interesting one. John no doubt thought that the sign would be much clearer when it finally came. But Jesus, in his answer, points not to world transforming occurrences but instead to very small events. Oh, some of them may be considered miraculous but always on an individual level. Jesus does not respond by saying what is happening at the level of nations or governments or populations or lands. He says look closely and see what is happening in the lives of people. He clarifies that he is at work on a very intimate level. Someone who was blind can now see. Someone else who was lame can now walk. Yet another person who was deaf can now hear. Someone who's had the good news brought to them and now feels hope.

Later on in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say, "Move," to a mountain and it will move. Though this is a powerful and well-known piece of scripture, but I think we often misinterpret it. I think the mistake is in believing that God's faithfulness is normally found in the moving of mountains ... but it's not. God's faithfulness is almost always seen in something that the world sees as inconsequential ... like a mustard seed.

This is the kind of individual, direct experience that convinces. This is what you would expect the God-at-hand to be doing. This is the evidence that another John celebrated when he wrote,

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life-- this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us-- we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1-4).

The scripture says that the God who is as far beyond our reach as a brain surgeon would be to a gnat has drawn near to us by becoming one of us. And so in the midst of Advent ... when we stand still to wait on God's arrival among us ... when we set our house in order and prepare to meet our God ... we break out in joy anticipating our celebration of the mystery and miracle of the incarnation ... God coming in the flesh and blood of Jesus ... Christ being born in our flesh and blood ... and borne by us into the world. Which means that God is as real as the bread and the wine we taste and touch in communion ... that God is as near as the person sitting next to you in the pew ... and that you and I are the proof that the world needs of the love and presence of God.

When someone asks does God exist? Or is God near or far? We say, “Come and see. Hang around a while and you’ll experience in this people God’s touch...God’s embrace...God’s love for you.” I’m not saying we are God. I’m only saying God is here among us. I’m not saying we are God’s only people. I’m only saying that people who were blind to it see the beauty and glory of their own lives as if for the first time. That people who have been crippled by life find healing and hope they never expected. That people who have been excluded as social or spiritual lepers are welcomed with a grace that refreshes their souls. That people who have quit listening learn to hear each others’ words and the hurts and hopes behind them. That people who felt dead inside discover new life and a new beginning beyond the pain of their past. And that the poor ... I mean those who are lacking what they need most ... I mean the physically needy and the spiritually needy ... hear good news.

All of us have times like John, imprisoned, paralyzed, filled with doubts. What we need in those moments is not a book to read or the pabulum of clichés, but someone to show Christ to us...to be Christ for us...to embrace us with the tangible love of a God who is as close to them as we are. What we need is to quit questioning Christ against our expectations, and like John, ask him: are you the One? Then wait and watch for our answer.

We prepare ourselves this season of Advent for the arrival of the ultimate seed, the birth of a child in a manger in the middle of nowhere. So, when life is dark ...when we are lost ... when we turn to God and ask, "Really?"... in those moments, be alert. Be aware. Look around. You are not alone. Mountains are not moving, but God IS!

So, wherever you are in your own walk with God, I invite you today to draw near to the Lord as he draws near to you. Then let us rejoice and welcome the Christ who is among us.

May we pray?

O God, be always near to us. O God, make clear to us each road. O God, make safe to us each step. When we stumble, catch us. When we fall, lift us up. When we are hard pressed by evil, deliver us. And bring us at last to your glory. Amen.