

Signs – Second Thoughts: “Are You the One?” – Matthew 11:2-11

"It's the most wonderful time of the year with the kids jingle-belling And everyone telling you 'Be of good cheer.' It's the most wonderful time of the year" (by Andy Williams) Or is it?

Yes, this is the time to celebrate, this is the time to be with family, this is the time to remember our Savior's birth. It is a wonderful time of year. Yet along with it comes frenzy and stress, disappointment, loneliness -- at times doubt, or even hopelessness.

Our Gospel today begins with John the Baptist in prison. He was placed there by King Herod Antipas. John's preaching held no favorites. He had publicly called for Herod to repent. You see, Herod Antipas had seduced his brother's wife on a trip to Rome. After returning to Jerusalem, Herod divorced his wife and married his sister-in-law.

John was doing what God had called him to do. He was the prophetic voice of one crying in the wilderness... Repent. Prepare your hearts. Reform your behavior. The judgment of God, the day of His wrath is coming. By the hundreds, by the thousands they came out to the river. They stepped into the water and asked for forgiveness.

Now he was incarcerated. No trial. No charges. Month after month he found himself waiting. His public words were silenced. He was wondering if his work had been successful.

Remember at the beginning of the service I asked what your favorite book was growing up? Here's a Dr. Seuss book entitled, "Are You My Mother?" It's about a baby bird born in the nest alone while the mother bird was out finding food. He fell out of the nest and started searching for his mother. He asked other many animals and objects, "Are you my mother?" Finally, they were reunited, and the baby bird was reassured by what he saw and heard from his mother. "You are the one. You are my mother!"

Back to our Gospel reading: In prison John was struggling a bit, even having second thoughts. If Jesus was the promised Messiah...where was the fire and brimstone? He expected Jesus the Messiah to punish the Herod's of the world. He knew the prophecies like Isaiah 11:4 "...where the coming Messiah would strike the earth with a rod and slay the wicked with the breath of his lips." He knew Isaiah 61:2 where it says that God's anointed would proclaim the day of vengeance of our God. So, John sent his disciples to ask: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

It's a fair question. Even God's greatest people ask their questions. We all have our doubts. Let's be honest. There are literally thousands of religions from which you can choose. Have you picked the right one? Is the cross of Jesus the only bridge that spans the gulf of sin that separates lost humanity from God's perfect holiness? He is or He isn't.

Ravi Zacharias, Christian apologist and author who grew up in India, asks a similar question in his book, *"Jesus among Other Gods:"* "In a world with so many religions, why Jesus?" Our post-modern culture struggles with the fundamental claims of Jesus. The following comments are typical in an America culture that has willingly embraced a multitude of religions.

"Aren't all religions fundamentally the same?" "Was Jesus who He claimed to be?" That's John's question.

Ravi Zacharias begins chapter one: "Philosophically, you can believe anything, so long as you do not claim it to be true. Morally, you can practice anything, so long as you do not claim that it

is a “better” way. Religiously, you can hold to anything, so long as you do not bring Jesus Christ into it.”

He continues, “All religions, plainly and simply, cannot be true. Some beliefs are false, and we know them to be false. So it does no good to put a halo on the notion of tolerance as if everything could be equally true. In the real life struggles between right and wrong, justice and injustice, life and death, we all realize that truth does matter.” (Ravi Zacharias Jesus Among Other Gods p. 4)

John’s question matters, even today. “Was Jesus who He claimed to be? Is He “the way, the truth, and the life?” “No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

Every word of that statement shocks post-modern mindsets. Hinduism and Bahaim have long challenged the concept of a single way to God. And now the Bishop of the Episcopalian Church agrees that there are many paths to God.

Jesus claimed that we can personally know God and the absolute nature of his love and truth. Agnostics deny that possibility. Jesus revealed himself as the Son of God who opens the door to heaven through his death and resurrection. Islam considers that claim to be blasphemous, and so did the Pharisees and Sadducees.

All religions are not the same. All religions do not point to God, the Creator, the Author of life.

John had every right to ask the question...Are you the one to come or are we to look for another? Before John was born, His purpose in life had been set. He was the forerunner of the Messiah, the Savior. His job was to call people to repentance. The waiting was over...or was it?

Jesus answered John’s question. Jesus told John how he could be sure as he fulfilled OT prophecy. “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up....And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

His life was holy. He challenged his adversaries to convict him of sin. (John 8:16) They could not. He forgave the sins of others....but he himself needed no forgiveness. We know God is holy... and we know we are far away from Him. Therefore a bridge must be built over the canyon that separates a Holy God from sinful people. God must come to us so that we might come to know his love instead of fear.

Max Lucado describes in Luke 8 that before Jesus went to the home of Jairus, it was a long night for the family. They sat beside their daughter’s bed caressing her pale forehead, watching her chest barely rise and fall with each distant breath. They were afraid to release her frail hand for fear that doing so might allow the daughter they loved so deeply, to tumble, over the brink. (God Came Near Max Lucado p 67)

They held her hand all night as they stood at the canyon’s edge. Aware that the final step was only hours away. As the morning sun began to break the dark night, they knew she was slipping away. Jairus, not wanting to leave, yet knew his daughter’s only hope was the touch of Jesus. He found Jesus in the village, and was about to bring Jesus to his house when a friend found them and said: “your daughter is dead. Don’t bother the teacher anymore.”

It’s a desolate moment. Many of you have been to the canyon’s edge. At the canyon’s edge all of life draws into perspective. What matters and what doesn’t are easily distinguished. No one is concerned about the car you drive or what part of town you live in.

Jesus undaunted at the canyon's edge...walks into the house. He takes the father and mother, Peter, James and John with him into the room, quiet with death. He reaches down, takes her hand. "My child, get up!" At once she stood up.

You see, if Jesus is God...if he is the one John expected, then He must be God in the face of death. Jesus, the visible presence of the invisible God came into this world to redeem humanity and offer the gift of eternal life.

That's the bottom line. This is the moment that separates Jesus from a thousand gurus and prophets yet to come. When God chose to reveal himself, he did so through a human body, found in a manger.

Roughly 33 years after he was born, He was arrested by His enemies who refused to acknowledge the heaven sent source of His miracles and His claim to be the promised Savior. They had him beaten. They pushed a crown of thorns on His head. They whipped his body with a whip studded with glass and metal. They crucified Him and hung Him in the sun. He died. He didn't faint. He didn't go into a coma. He died. We know He died because the Roman guard stabbed His heart. They buried him, and posted a guard at his grave.

Then on the third day, Jesus rose from death. He came back to life. Time and time again people saw him. Search other religions; no other faith attempts to make such a resurrection claim. The bible says: "Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God."

Do you believe that Jesus is the one? It is the question John had to answer in his cell, alone. It is the one question each of us has to ask, and we must answer alone.

It's almost Christmas. It's a time to sing the songs that proclaim the Savior's birth. But sometimes those songs are not that well known. Ken Klaus, former speaker for The Lutheran Hour, tells of a Christian school teacher from a small town in the southeast. Having rehearsed her second graders, she felt brave enough to take them caroling. They went to a number of places where the people were homebound. The wondering concert ended up in the community's only nursing home. There the teacher, with her charges in tow, wandered the hallways giving as song at the doorway of each resident. Only then did the teacher notice that one of her more enthusiastic singers had rewritten the words to one of the songs.

Where he was suppose to be singing: "Noel, Noel," (Noel, meaning Christmas or Christmastide) he was belting out for all to hear. "No hell, no hell, born is the King of Israel." (Dr. Ken Klaus, Lutheran Hour, Matthew 11, 2004)

I like his interpretation... it certainly explains what Christmas is all about. Christmas is around the corner. How will you celebrate this year? Will it be in doubt and denial, or will you like the shepherds, go and see the Savior and worship the Savior who came to save us from the fear of death, the devil and hell itself?

So dear friend, don't neglect this most wonderful message at this wonderful time of the year. Kneel again at his manger in holy awe. He did not come in his divine glory but in lowliness. So also, as we follow him in this life expect lowliness. Expect hatred. Expect persecution. Think of John. But follow Jesus, nonetheless, with your faith focused on His Word. Take to heart the Good News he proclaims to you. For His Word reveals to you the wonderful Savior that baby is. It reveals to you the wonderful paradise of heaven he came to prepare for you. He's the One. Amen.