

Are You the One?

At this season of the year, one of my favorite stories is *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens. In the narrative, that grasping old miser, Ebenezer Scrooge, is visited in his home by the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley. Scrooge is more than a little skeptical about this strange apparition.

“You don’t believe in me,” observed the Ghost.

“I don’t,” said Scrooge.

“What evidence would you have of my reality, beyond that of your senses?”

“I don’t know,” said Scrooge.

“Why do you doubt your senses?”

“Because,” said Scrooge, “a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There’s more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!”

Most of us are familiar with Scrooge. But there's someone else we encounter at this time of year; not a fictional character like Scrooge, but—according to all four gospels—a historical figure. John the Baptist. Last Sunday's gospel account revealed the John we know: that fiery, prophetic preacher thundering in the wilderness, calling for repentance, preparing the way for One who comes after him. An assertive, confident, self-assured John.

But much has happened since that day beside the Jordan. John has dared to speak the truth to power. John has publicly rebuked Herod for his extramarital relationship with his brother's wife. And at about the same time that Jesus begins his ministry, Herod has John arrested and locked up in prison.

Now, if you've never been in prison, you can only imagine how it feels when heavy metal doors clang shut behind you and you know there's no getting out. You're locked in with uncertainty. With fear. With despair. In prison, time seems to pass very slowly. That's how it is for John.

In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, we envision a very different John than we saw last week. A pensive,

brooding John. Alone with anxiety and apprehension. Contemplating what lies ahead. Torture? Even death? He's staked so much on Jesus. John has announced that the coming One will cut down the unrepentant and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.

But in prison, John's heard rumors that the ministry of Jesus hasn't been like that at all. The ministry of Jesus has been more about healing and renewal than about hellfire and brimstone. It's been not so much about judgment. It's been all about grace. The ministry of Jesus hasn't been what John thought it would be. It hasn't been what John *told* people it would be.

John's just not sure. Even though, after the baptism, he himself has seen the heavens opened and heard the Beloved Son affirmed. John's just not sure anymore if Jesus is who John thought he is. So John sends his followers to Jesus with a question: *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

Are you the one? It's a question we ask over and over, in various life settings and situations.

Maybe you're out Christmas shopping. You're searching for a special gift for someone you love. And you see something you think that person would like. It's well-made and of good quality. It has many attractive features. But is it the perfect gift? Should you keep looking? You're just not sure. As you hold it in your hands, there in the store, you wonder: *Is this the one?*

Or let's say you're house-hunting. Maybe you're standing on the threshold of the fifth house you've seen that weekend. And they're all running together in your mind. This particular house in front of you is charming. Welcoming. Inviting. The realtor says it meets all your specifications. And the price is reasonable. But this is the biggest purchase you'll ever make. A critically important decision. As you step into the foyer, do you get an overpowering feeling of having come home? Or is that feeling not there? You ask yourself: *Is this the one?*

Many of you, at some point in your life, have gone in search of an animal companion to share your days. Maybe, when you felt ready to adopt a dog or a cat, you visited a shelter for homeless animals. You thought about the major

commitment involved in offering an animal a forever home. You considered factors like diet and exercise and temperament and your own lifestyle. Then, suddenly, right there in front of you, was a winsome creature with bright eyes that seemed to speak to your heart. One who needed you. And the question popped into your mind: *Are you the one?*

Or perhaps there was a time when you hadn't yet chosen that special someone who would become your life partner. Someone to love and be loved by.

On a personal note, it was on this very day, many years ago, that Bob Deal and I met for the first time. He blesses my life, and I give thanks for him.

Maybe you, too, have been involved in that trial and error process known as "dating." As the relationship progressed, you ran through a mental checklist: mutual attraction, common interests, shared values, trustworthiness, sense of humor, communication. And so on. But eventually, you asked an unspoken question of that person: *Do I need to keep looking—or are you the one?*

Are you the one? Don't you and I, like John the Baptist, ask that question of Jesus, too? Isn't it *our* question? To be human is to doubt. Even the most faithful Christians have moments of doubt. Even *seasons* of doubt.

For many, this could be one of those seasons. This isn't a festive time of year for everyone. In some homes, there's an empty place at the table. The family circle is incomplete. In others, there are financial struggles, even at a time when it seems that everyone else can *afford* to be jolly. Sometimes there are feelings of isolation, when it seems as though everyone else is decking the halls. Celebrating. Enjoying intimate gatherings with family and friends. Whether it's loneliness or worry or grief, in the darkness of December, sometimes in our humanness we cry out: *Jesus, are you the One I can trust in my life? Are you the One I can trust with my life?*

And at other times, in our human condition, do we—just as John did—ponder whether Jesus is who we thought he is, when those we consider deserving of his judgment don't *get* judgment? But get grace instead? When instead of getting

what we think they have coming to them, they receive good news and restoration? When Jesus doesn't do what we think he's supposed to do? Doesn't meet our expectations? Doesn't fit into the box we've tried to put him in?

Am I guilty of attempting to mold Jesus into my concept of what I think he should be? Have I tried to shape him into *my* image? Have I forgotten that I am made in *God's* image, and not the other way around?

The better we get to know Jesus, the more we find out that he isn't who we expect him to be. Neither is he who John expects him to be. So John has his disciples ask: *Are you the One?* And Jesus answers John's question in a way he knows John will understand. For John is steeped in the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, and in these words of Jesus, John hears—and we too hear—echoes of the Holy One speaking through the prophet Isaiah: *the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

We've heard Isaiah's song this morning, and we've heard the song of a young girl living centuries later in the backwater

village of Nazareth. Mary the mother of Jesus sings of One who is turning this upside-down world right-side up. She sings of the powerful being brought low and the lowly being lifted up. She sings of the hungry being filled and the rich being emptied. Isaiah and Mary and Jesus himself all proclaim radical inversion of the way things have been. Isaiah and Mary and Jesus proclaim the overturning of the status quo for those who wear soft robes and live in royal palaces and oppress the poor and the powerless.

The One who is to come is identified by his reversal of the old order of disease and disability and mortality. The One who is to come is recognized in the good news of cleansing and healing and raising.

Look at what I'm doing, says Jesus to John. Look at what I'm doing, says Jesus to us today. What evidence would you have beyond that of your senses? What do you see and hear? You'll know me by what I'm doing. That's how you'll know that I am the One you've waited for, the One who is to come.

This coming, this Advent is a holy time when we are opened. A holy time when our eyes and ears are opened; when

the eyes and the ears of our hearts are opened to discern this One who is still working wonders in the world and even within us. For this is the One who touches broken places deep inside. This is the One who drives the chaff out of your life and mine. This is the One who cuts away the fruitless parts of you and me. This is the One who shapes us into the loving servants we are meant to be. This is the One who uses our hands and the hands of our brothers and sisters in small yet faithful acts of compassion and caring, of kindness and comfort, of transforming tenderness. This is the One who, out of death, bring resurrection life. This is the One who, when you hear his words and see his works, you know as Jesus the anointed One, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ. The One you've waited for, the One who is coming to you, the One who fills you with everlasting joy. Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.