

NOVEMBER 21, 2021

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 14:1-12

MESSAGE: "Why Is God Sitting On His Hands?"

He was a child of the desert - leathery face, tanned skin, clothing made from the skins of animals. What he owned fitted into a pouch, yet his walls were the mountains, & his roof the stars. But not anymore! His frontier was diminished; his horizon hidden. Now all he sees are dank & dingy stone walls, and the continual stench of the dungeon is a constant reminder to him that he is a prisoner of the king.

In anyone's book, John the Baptist deserved better than this. After all, wasn't he the forerunner of the Christ? At the very least, isn't he the courageous voice of repentance?

Recently, that voice, instead of opening doors to renewal, has opened the door to a prison cell. John's troubles started when he decided to haul a king up 'on the carpet.' On a trip to Rome, King Herod succumbed to the enticements of his brother's wife, Herodias. He decided that she was better off married to him than to his brother. And so, he divorced his wife & brought his sister-in-law back home with him.

If this had been today, the gossip columnists would have had a field day. Imagine the paparazzi going into a frenzy so they could make their journalistic deadlines!

John the Baptist was infuriated. He pounced on Herod like a mountain lion, denouncing the royal marriage for what it was - adultery!

Herod might have let him get away with all this, except for his steamy seductress, Herodias. She wasn't about to make her 'social climbing' plans become public knowledge.

She demanded that Herod pull John off his speaking circuit & throw him in jail. Herod hemmed & hawed, & then, reluctantly, agreed to her desires. But that wasn't enough for this mistress. She had her daughter 'strut her stuff' before Herod & his generals, at a 'stag party'.

Herod, who was as easily duped as he was aroused, promised to do anything for this pretty young thing in her G string. "Anything, you name it." he drooled.

She conferred with her mother, who was waiting in the wings, then returned with her request. "I want the Baptist!"

"You want a date with the Prophet?"

"No, I want the head of John the Baptist ... on a silver platter, if you don't mind."

Herod looked at the faces around him. They were all looking at him, waiting for his answer. He knew it wasn't fair, but he had promised, 'anything.'

Personally, he didn't have anything against this country preacher, but he did value his 'opinion polls' a lot more than he valued John's life. A king has to save face, even if it means the neck of an eccentric prophet.

The story reeks of inequity. John dies because Herod lusts. The good is murdered while the wicked smirks. A man of God is killed, while a man of passion is winking at his niece.

Is this how God rewards His anointed? Is this how God honours & crowns His faithful – with a dark dungeon & a shiny blade?

The inconsistency was more than John could take. When he heard, in prison, what Jesus was doing, he sent his disciple to him and asked his despairing question: "Are You the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Note what motivated John's question. It was not just the dungeon, or the prospect of death. It was the problem of 'unmet expectations' ...the fact that John was there, in prison, while Jesus was out & about, conducting business as usual.

Is this what Messiahs do when trouble comes? Is this what God does when His followers are in a bind?

"Are You the One, or have I been following the wrong Lord?"

Had the Bible been written by public relations' experts, this particular reference would most certainly have been omitted. It's not good politics to admit that one cabinet minister has doubts about the prime minister. It doesn't show a united front.

But the Scriptures were not written by personality agents. They were inspired by an eternal God who knew that every disciple from then on, would spend some time in a dungeon of doubt.

If God is so good, why do I hurt so badly? What did I do to deserve this? Did God 'slip up' this time? Why are the righteous persecuted? We have all had these thoughts. We have all entertained these doubts.

In his book, "Disappointment with God", Philip Yancey quotes a letter which articulates the problem of unmet expectations, in all its excruciating reality.

Meg Wilson lost two children to Cystic Fibrosis, & her daughter's death at 23 was particularly traumatic. Her letter read, in part; "I was sitting beside her bed a few days before her death, when suddenly she began to scream. I will never forget those shrill, piercing, primal screams."

It's against this background of humans falling apart, that God, who could have helped, looked down upon this young woman, so devoted to Him, & sat on His hands, letting her death top the horror charts of Cystic Fibrosis deaths.

Does God, sometimes, sit on His hands? Does God, sometimes, choose to do nothing? Does God, sometimes, opt for silence when I'm screaming my loudest?

Way back when, my eldest child, Dan, got a bicycle & was uncertainly attempting to master the balance required to avoid the inevitable. My daughter, Vicki, wanted a bike too, but was, at least in my opinion, not old enough yet. I told her that as time came around, when she was bigger, I would get her one, & that right now, Daddy knew best. She just stared at me & said she wanted a new Daddy.

Even though the words came from a child's mouth, they carried an adult's sentiments. Disappointment requires a change in command. When we don't agree with the one who is calling the shots, our reaction is often the same as my daughter's.

This is also the same as John's, "Is He the right one for the job?"

As John put it, "Are You the One, or shall we look for another?"

Vicki felt that the situation was not ideal...all that she could see was a Daddy 'sitting on his hands.'

John couldn't believe that anything short of release from his prison cell, would be for the best interest of all concerned.

I can't believe that God would sit in silence while a missionary is kicked out of a foreign country, or a Christian loses a promotion because of his belief, or a faithful wife is abused by her unbelieving husband. These are some of the concerns on my prayer list, which seem to have gone unanswered.

Jesus said, "Go back & tell John what you hear & see - the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised & the Good News is preached to the poor."

This was Jesus' answer to John's questions. But before you study what Jesus said, please note what He didn't say.

First, He didn't get angry. He didn't throw up his hands in disgust. He didn't scream, "What in the world do I have to do for John? I've already become flesh. I've been sinless for three decades. I let him baptize me! What else does he want? Go & tell that ungrateful locust-eater I am shocked at his disbelief."

He could have done that, and many might have...but Jesus didn't.

It should also be noted that Jesus, the one who walked on water, the one who cast out demons, could have saved John, but he didn't. There were no battle plans, SWAT teams, or flashing swords - just a message, "Go & tell John that everything is going according to plan. The Kingdom is being inaugurated." These words of Jesus are more than a statement from Isaiah, they are a description of a Heavenly Kingdom being established.

None were more shunned than the blind, the lame, the lepers & the deaf. They had no place, no name, no value. They were considered to be excess baggage. But those the world called trash, Jesus called treasures.

I used to have a sweater, knit by my mother. I know that every stitch was made with love. I grew out of it & it had a couple of holes at the elbow...but I loved that sweater.

This must have been what the Psalmist meant when he said, "You knit me together in my mother's womb".

Think on these words...you weren't an accident... you weren't mass produced...you were deliberately planned, specifically gifted & lovingly positioned on this earth by the Master Craftsman.

In a society that has little room for second fiddles, that's good news. In a culture where the door of opportunity opens only once & then slams shut... that is a revelation. In a society which measures a human by the number of zeros on their paycheque, it's an eye opener.

Let me tell you something - Jesus' plan is a reason for joy.

Jesus told John that the new kingdom was coming - a kingdom where people have value, not because of what they do, but WHOSE they are.

Jesus wasn't oblivious to John's imprisonment. He was dealing with a greater dungeon than Herod's. He was dealing with the dungeon of death.

But Jesus wasn't through. He passed one other message to clear the cloud of doubt from John's heart, "The Good News is being preached to the poor."

No other religion offers such a message... all others demand performance, the right sacrifice, the correct chant, the right ritual, the right séance or experience.

There's a kingdom of 'Trade Off's'... you do this...& God will give you that. The result... either arrogance or fear. Arrogance if you think you've achieved it...fear if you haven't.

Christ's Kingdom is just the opposite. It's a kingdom for the poor - a kingdom where membership is granted, not purchased.

You are PLACED into God's Kingdom. This occurs, not when you do enough, but when you admit you can't do enough. You can't earn it... you simply accept it. As a result, you serve, not out of arrogance or fear, but out of gratitude.

The unique characteristic of the New Kingdom is different than those of others. Its' subjects don't have to work in order to get to heaven. Arrogance & fear are replaced by gratitude & joy.

We still don't know how John received Jesus' message, but we can imagine. I like to think that a slight smile came to his lips as he read what the Master said.

So that's it, that's what the Kingdom will be...that is what the King will do. For now, he understood. It wasn't that Jesus was silent. It was that John had been listening for an answer to his earthly problems, while Jesus was about solving His Heavenly ones. This is worth remembering the next time you hear the Silence of God.

St. Teresa of Avila was insightful enough to pray, "Do not punish me by granting that which I wish or ask."

The fact is, John wasn't asking for too much, he was asking too little.

He was asking the Father to resolve the temporary, while Jesus was about solving the eternal.

Does this mean that Jesus has no regard for injustice? No, He cares about persecutions. He cares about inequities & hunger & prejudice, & He knows what it's like to be punished for something He didn't do.

He knows the meaning of the phrase, "It just isn't right." It wasn't right that people spat into the eyes that wept for them. It wasn't right that the soldiers ripped chunks of flesh from the back of God. It wasn't right that spikes pierced the hands that formed the earth. It wasn't right that the Son of God was forced to listen to the Silence of God.

It wasn't right, but it happened. For while Jesus was on the cross, God did sit on His hands; He did turn His back; He did ignore the screams of the innocent. He sat in silence while the sins of the world were placed upon His son, & He did nothing while a cry a million times bloodier than John's, echoed in the black sky, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

In a world of injustice, God, once & for all, tipped the scales in favour of hope, & He did it by sitting on His hands so that we would know the Kingdom of God. AMEN