

December 11, 2022

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10

Psalms 146

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Have you ever wished that, just once, Jesus would have given a simple, straight-forward answer to a question? I know I have. In our time and in our culture, we like things to be black or white, unambiguous, and without nuance. Those of us old enough to remember the 1950s and 1960s tv show, *Dragnet*, will surely remember Sergeant Joe Friday's famous line, "Just the facts, ma'am." We do not want to be bothered with details and peripheral stuff. Just give me the bottom line. Don't make me figure it out for myself. That absolute, either/or approach may work well in police interrogations, but it is not at all helpful in matters of faith. True faith means believing without knowing the facts, or even needing to know them. The original sin narrative found in *The Second Story of Creation*, Genesis, Chapter 2, warns us against the temptation to substitute faith with facts. God commanded Adam, "You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad." But Adam and Eve were tempted, and they ate the fruit of that tree anyway, when the serpent said to them, "...your eyes will be opened, and you will...know what is good and what is bad." So, how can knowledge of good and bad lead to sin? It sounds like it should be a virtue. But an unhealthy lust for knowledge about what is good and what is bad can produce rash judgements about who is holy and who is not. It can become a search for control rather than a search for love, and it often leads to scapegoating, persecution, and even violence. Authentic faith is a call to humility, not a call to certainty. So, it stands to reason that Jesus seldom gave direct answers, and that he answered many questions with parables. When he was asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. When the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus

about stoning a woman caught in adultery he answered, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And, in today's gospel, when John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" he answered, "Go and tell John what you hear and see..." He continued by paraphrasing the words of the prophet Isaiah, "...the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them." In other words, John, you figure it out.

Jesus and John the Baptist knew each other well. They were cousins. Jesus went to John to be baptized, and John heard the voice from the heavens say, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased." John knew that Jesus is the Messiah. But Jesus and John did not preach the same message. John emphasized vengeance and retribution, while Jesus emphasized forgiveness and mercy. So, John's question of Jesus may not have been a question at all, but a statement – a statement that Jesus did not fit John's expectation of the Messiah. Jesus responded to John's thinly veiled criticism by saying, "And, blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." But Jesus did not criticize John in return. Instead, he honored John when he said, "...among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist." And in so doing, Jesus acknowledged the both/and nature of our faith – repentance and mercy.

In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah promises renewal and everlasting joy. Just as rain makes a parched and seemingly dead desert explode with life almost overnight, God's mercy renews the people of God. "Be strong, fear not!" Isaiah says, our God comes to save us. Though a desert can burst into life within hours after rain, it may have endured drought for years before the rain finally came. So, the second reading from the Letter of James tempers our joy with its call for patience. In this reading, James presents farmers and the prophets as models of patience. Farmers plant their crops and wait patiently for

rains to nourish them to bountiful harvests. As all farmers know, sometimes the rains come in time; sometimes they do not. The words of the prophets were ignored by the people of Israel for many years before God intervened and their prophecies were fulfilled. Though their words often fell on deaf ears, the prophets continued patiently to teach. Likewise, farmers continue to tend their crops through drought, preparing patiently for rain. With these analogies, James is encouraging us to use our time effectively to prepare and to endure whatever hardships may come our way as we wait patiently for the Lord's coming. Patience is not just an idle pastime for James. It is an active virtue, and it involves both preparation and perseverance.

As we prepare and wait patiently during this Advent season for the coming of Jesus, let us take care that we do not try to confine Jesus with our expectations. He does not fit in a box. Instead, let's keep our hearts and our minds open to Jesus working in our lives in whatever shape or form that may take. Let us open our eyes to see Jesus in all people and in all circumstances.