

“Should We Wait for Somebody Else?”

If I could go back in time and live someone else's life, even if just for a little while, I know whose life I would NOT want to live. I would not want to be John the Baptist-- not because of his weird diet, or his animal hide suit, or that he slept under the stars with the ground for a bed and a stone for a pillow. My reluctance has to do with his vocation.

If you asked what he did for a living, he'd say, "I'm a VOICE." His job description came from the prophet Isaiah: "Behold the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight." John had only one sermon. It was a short, but effective, warning people to get ready for the Messiah.

John didn't offer many details. "When is he coming?" the crowd asked. "I don't know," he said. "What's his name?" "I don't know." "What does he look like?" "I don't know." "Will he come on the clouds or on his own two feet?" "I don't know." "When he shows up will we know its him?" "I can't say for sure." The sermon raised more questions than answers, but it didn't keep people from being baptized and ready for the Messiah whenever and however he showed up.

If I were John, I would have asked lot of questions. I'd want a detailed description of everything I was supposed to do and say. I would need biographical information about the one whose way I was to prepare. John didn't know much, but he was sure of one thing: The Messiah was coming to set everything wrong, right, then start over from scratch. "It won't be long now. You better change your tune and change your life."

Last Sunday, John was baptizing people in the Jordan River and preaching with the disposition of a junkyard dog. Today's text

finds him in very different circumstances. There are no crowds listening to him. He is locked in a dungeon.

Sooner or later, John's mouth was bound to get him into trouble. Herod Antipas went to Rome to visit his brother who had married his own niece. During the visit Herod seduced her, returned to Jerusalem, dumped his wife and married his brother's wife. John didn't hesitate to speak the truth to the powerful, and when he caught wind of it, he called Herod an adulterer. Politicians don't like preachers criticizing their policies, and they HATE preachers meddling in their personal affairs.

Herod threw John into solitary confinement. His only company was rats and his own thoughts.

You know what its like to be sick and confined to the house. The world goes on without you. You lay all day on the couch thinking about how bad you feel. Unsettling thoughts that were submerged by your busyness pop into your head. "Do I want to continue what I am doing the rest of my life?" "Shouldn't my life amount to more than this?" "If there is a God in heaven, does my life have a purpose here?" We don't like these questions, so we deal with them the best way we know how-- by turning on the television.

John was giddy when Jesus arrived. Now Mr. Voice could sit back and watch the fireworks. He hadn't planned on going to jail or losing his head. As reports about Jesus filtered back to John, he began to reassess Jesus. He wasn't acting as John expected. He was certain before. Now he wasn't sure, so he sent his disciples to Jesus with this question: "Are you the one we've been expecting, or are we still waiting? Should we be looking for someone else?"

A married couple went to a counselor. The newlywed stage was over and they were starting to smell the coffee. "What brings you here?" the therapist asks. "She's not the woman I married," the husband declares. His wife jumps in, "Prince Charming

turned into Barney Fife." Their expectations of marriage have collided with reality. They were so certain, but now, they aren't so sure.

We know what it is like to wait for something we want very much. It might be getting the first car, starting college, graduation, marriage, having children, a new job, taking a dream vacation, planning for retirement. What about Christmas? Do you remember how hard it was waiting when you were a kid, crossing the days off the calendar and wondering if December 24 would ever come?

Over time, however, experience has taught us that when the moment or the thing we longed for finally comes, it often doesn't live up to the hype. We thought it would be wonderful, but it turned out to be something less.

Three nurses died and went to heaven. St. Peter said, "So tell me-what did you do with your lives?" The first nurse said, "Well, I worked in an emergency room, and it was really challenging. But we were able to help some people, and I think it was worthwhile." St. Peter said, "Wonderful-come on in and enjoy your eternity." He turned to the second nurse and said, "So, what did you do with your life?" She replied, "I worked in a hospice, and it was sad because everyone died. But we were kind to people and helped them die with dignity." St. Peter said, "That's touching. Please, come in. I hope you enjoy heaven."

He turned to the third nurse and said, "And what did you do with your life?" She replied, "For the last years of my life, I worked as a managed-care nurse for a big HMO." "Oh?" St. Peter said as he wrinkled his brow, pulled out a calculator, a whole set of manuals, and a pencil. Several minutes passed as he wrote and scrunched up sheets of paper. He looked up to the nurse and said, "I can approve you for five-day stay." It wasn't what she expected.

A while back I quoted St. Francis who said, "Our understandings are misunderstandings." God IS the same, yesterday, today, and forever, but it doesn't mean God is predictable. The Bible reveals

a God who doesn't behave as mortals think God should behave. When dealing with God, the unexpected is the rule, not the exception!

John thought Jesus was going to set things straight in drastic, dramatic ways, by calling down angel armies to crush the Rome. He thought Jesus would be a hanging judge. He thought Jesus would reveal his awesome powers and instill fear into those who were against him. But this isn't how Jesus ministered.

I had a conversation with Blair Helman, about the issues he faced during his thirty years as President at Manchester College. Occasionally, parents of a student who had breached college rules would come to his office and demand that the college take a punitive action against their son or daughter. "Throw the book at them." Blair sometimes replied, "If memory serves me correctly, you pulled some stunts when you were a student here. Are you saying I should have thrown the book at you, or that I should apply a different standard to your son?"

Jesus preferred the judgment of mercy and forgiveness over giving people what they deserved. Jesus loved children, outcasts, and others who weren't productive members of society. Jesus preferred the company of the poor over the rich, and the powerless over the powerful. He won people's hearts with healing and hope and not the fear of hell. Jesus reserved his harshest judgment for his own religious community, and preached the good news to everyone.

I know where John was coming from. It didn't add up. Love your enemies? Repay evil with good? Count others better than yourselves? Forgive seventy times seven? Blessed are the persecuted? "Are you SURE you're the one we've been waiting for, or should we look for someone else?" It sounds like the question Notre Dame officials are asking of potential football coaches.

Last week on NPR, I heard an interview with the biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan who teaches at DePaul University. He talked about the power of the religious right and the claim that

they speak for most Christians. Crossan was asked why he thought they place so much emphasis on Jesus' second coming. He said the behavior of Jesus portrayed by the Christian right bears more resemblance to Arnold Swartzenager's "Terminator" than to Jesus in the gospels. He said, "Maybe the doctrine of Jesus' second coming is so important to them because they can't accept what Jesus taught in his first coming."

We all have our understandings, misunderstandings, and expectations of Jesus, none of which Jesus is obliged to fulfill. The big buzz over Mel Gibson's, The Passion of the Christ has settled some, but those who saw it know the intense emotions it stirred. What made it difficult to watch was Jesus response to the evil inflicted upon him. "For crying out loud, Jesus, you're God's son. Don't let Pilate mess with you. You don't have to take his abuse. Punch him in the nose! Take the scourge from that centurion and rip his back to shreds. Get yourself down from that cross and show everyone once and for all who you are. Come on, Jesus, show them!"

Jesus didn't behave the way John thought he should. He didn't behave like Peter thought he should, either. He didn't behave the way Judas hoped he would. After the crucifixion, two dejected disciples walked with a stranger and said, "We had hoped he was the one who would redeem Israel." And Jesus still doesn't behave like we think he should.

There will be a lot of Christmas cards in the mail system over the next two weeks. As far as getting the Christmas message straight, most cards, with some exceptions, won't. Many will play on the sentimentality of little baby Jesus who asks nothing of us except warm feelings on one night of the year. As Christians we must ask ourselves whether we have tried to conform Jesus to our ideas, or whether we will submit ourselves to his.

Years ago, the British comedy troupe Monty Python produced a movie called, "The Life of Brian." The premise of the movie was, "What if two babies were born in Bethlehem on the same street,

on December 24?" The Wise Men arrive bearing their gifts, but instead of going to the house with the glowing manger, they mistakenly go to a house where a baby named Brian was born.

After he had grown, Brian was abducted by aliens who took him to goodness knows where in the universe. When they brought him back, people conclude that he was the Messiah. crowds followed him wherever he went and took in every word he said, which had no significance at all. He used to belong to a revolutionary group, and upon his return he was proclaimed their leader. His heart wasn't into it, and when the time for the revolt against Rome arrived, Brian wanted them to start the revolution without him.

The people worshiped Brian and built a religion around him, while the real Messiah had a difficult time getting a following. Brian wasn't the one they had been waiting for. They should have been waiting for someone else.

Who are you waiting for? Is it Jesus, or are you keeping an eye open for someone else?