

Advent 3A 2022

From prison, where John has been arrested for upsetting the status quo by daring to encourage people to live without fear so that they can be fully themselves, he hears what his cousin Jesus has been doing since he baptized him.

This makes John wonder whether his cousin is the messiah.

Notice what makes him suspect this.

John hears what Jesus is *doing*.

True to form, John is more concerned about what people actually *do*, what he calls their fruits, than about what their ancestry or social position or theology might be.

Also true to form, he does not beat around the bush, but comes right out and asks.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Jesus in turn answers in kind, not by saying “I am he,” but by telling John more details about the fruits of his ministry.

“The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

We see that Jesus also does not define the messiah primarily in terms of ancestry or social position.

He does not answer, in other words, “I am the direct descendent of King David himself!”

Neither does he defend the orthodoxy of his belief with something like:

“I know for certain whether or not there is a resurrection”—a topic hotly debated by the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Nor does Jesus base being the messiah on his obedience to all 613 Jewish laws—an assertion central to the Pharisees’ claim to legitimacy.

Both John and Jesus know that one could have all of these things and still have an empty heart, still not be fully alive in God, still be a jerk.

The thing that matters most to John and to Jesus is *how* we relate to people, what we do in relationship with them.

Jesus adds the rather interesting clause, “And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

In other words, if we accept Jesus’ healing and delivering of good news, then we are blessed.

Here we encounter that joyful word again, μακάριός, which means happy or joyful.

If we embrace Jesus’ way of being, we are joyful.

Otherwise, we are lost, a faint shadow of our full selves.

C. S. Lewis spoke eloquently about what it means to be our full selves.

He stated that, just as salt brings out the flavor of food, Christ brings out our true personalities.¹

Otherwise, we are dedicated more to escape and distraction, which is running from ourselves, leaving ourselves undeveloped, sleepwalking through life.

Lewis says, “Our real selves are waiting for us in [Christ]. . . . It’s only when you allow yourself to be drawn in to his life that you turn into a true person,”² rather than someone defined by avoidance, by fear.

We have to give up the self that we have created in order to be comfortable, in order to fit in, in order to be liked, if we want to find our true selves in Christ.

Lewis reminds us that we must “Look for Christ and you will get him, and with him, everything else thrown in. Look for yourself, [on the other hand], and you will get only hatred, loneliness, despair, ruin.”

The more we chase happiness, the more it recedes from us.

Consider this in the context of how social media encourages us to package our lives as entertainment for others.

We are being trained to present ourselves in ways that will get attention from those who seek distraction.

In doing so, we lose touch with our true selves, with the fullness of life, which does not always make a pretty package that will sell.

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbRs7foGmnQ&t=267s>

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In fact, the most important aspects rarely do.

One of my friends recently called to talk about an experience he had had.

He had been discerning a course of action and had agonized over what to do.

He is a thoughtful person and one of the most ethical people I have ever met.

In fact, when he was preparing to take the bar exam and asked me to be his ethics reference, I had an easy time saying yes.

In some ways, however, his desire to be ethical is his weakness.

He has always done what *others* expected of him.

As he attempted to discern what to do in his current quandary, he was torn by how his actions would be viewed by others.

He wanted to do the right thing *in their eyes*.

After much emotional turmoil, however, he finally just let go.

Instead of trying to force the right decision, he let the answer come to him.

For the first time in his life, he reported, he felt a great sense of peace in his heart.

He was absolutely certain that he had made the right choice, but found it incomprehensible how he had arrived at this.

He grew up in a secular family, you see.

He had no context, no vocabulary to make sense of this experience.

He assumed that I, too, would have difficulty understanding, that his explanation would make no sense to others.

In reality, this experience makes perfect sense from a Christian perspective.

We have a vocabulary to express it.

We let go of our egos, our need to please, our need to be admired, which controls our decisions, and wait for an answer from God.

When the answer arrives, it produces a sense of peace and certainty in our hearts, the peace and certainty that come with being in accord with God.

I had the feeling that my saying this to him was like someone explaining the rules of cricket to me.

It is a big leap and a lot to absorb.

John came for just this reason, to narrow the leap, as it were, so that Jesus' message would fall on fallow soil as often as possible.

It takes courage to ignore what others want in order to do the right thing.

John's courage led to his imprisonment.

When Jesus hears, he is greatly disturbed and defends John against the slander.

First, he says that John has done exactly what one would expect a prophet to do.

He has stood his ground firmly, not like a reed shaken by the wind, and preached the word.

John was, moreover, appropriately more concerned with God's will than he was with his own appearance, with how others saw him.

He did not wear fine robes like the elite, but was dedicated to the spread of the message.

Jesus says that John is not *merely* a prophet, however, but is the messenger who was sent to prepare his way.

Jesus concludes by saying that John is at the pinnacle of development on this plane of existence, this spiritual bootcamp where our hearts are tenderized and made ready for the kingdom of heaven.

John is fully himself, concerned solely about God.

Many find this quality in others off-putting.

They realize that they cannot use such people to advance their own cause.

You see, many people are nice to us, are our "friends" as long as we support their ego or can be used for their purposes.

The more we follow God, however, the less usable we become.

People take offense at this.

Blessed are those who do not, Jesus says.

When discerning, we must wait on God, on Christ's appearing in our hearts.

The answer does not always come, of course.

Sometimes this is because it just does not matter which thing we do.

A friend of mine told me about having agonized over which college to attend.

Eventually, she got the answer, which was, "It doesn't matter!"

Sometimes we do not get an answer because we simply are not ready for the answer

(even though we want it).

Sometimes it is because we are still trying to control the outcome.

In other words, we are seeking the solution that makes us look good, so we are not really

listening to God.

Discernment requires letting go of the need to look good in the eyes of others.

We set the question in our minds and try to remain open to whatever answer God sends

our way.

We know that we have our answer when our hearts are filled with peace.

Over time, this process of discernment trains us to wait on God rather than to be slaves

to our egos.

In addition, it makes us more sensitive to others, less arrogant about knowing what

others should do.

This education is all a part of the blessing of the spiritual bootcamp that is earth.

