

SERMON DEC 11,2016 MATTHEW 11:2-11 by Emily Rotch

Praise and honor to you living God for John the Baptist,
and for all those voices crying in the wilderness
who prepare your way.

May we listen when a prophet speaks your word, and obey. NZPB
My first reaction to today's gospel was to think how familiar it was: as members of St John Baptist, we hear scripture about John more than most. My reactions to the passage were familiar to me as well. Jesus has always sounded a bit impatient, testy even, as though he is wondering why John has to ask. A bit like a teacher saying: "Well, did you read the lesson?" A very human Jesus. At the same time I'm seeing in my minds' eye pictures of a kind of medieval Jesus wearing a large halo busily healing people. If that were the reality Jesus was describing as he talked about healing and good news, why indeed would John need to ask? The obvious answer is that John wasn't seeing what he expected to see, that that wasn't the reality he had looked for. Was John expecting a figure more like my haloed saint, kind of a magic Jesus, or perhaps he was looking for the heroic war leader, the new David prophesied in parts of the old testament.

We lay preachers are very privileged in terms of the amount of time we can spend on a passage, and I took some time to sit with my pictures, and the longer I thought, the less likely that medieval saint seemed and the more likely it seemed that John and I were both being a bit blind though not necessarily the same way. Since one of the ways I understand and approach scripture is as a teaching tool to apply to my present, a story where I can learn from the characters I feel close to, what happens when I try to walk in this case, in John's sandals? If I do that, what more do I see, where should I look?, what might I hear? as I try to walk with John? In spite of all the possible things I can find wrong with the world the truth is the lame (myself included) do walk, do see, are cured of many diseases. Unless, however, we, or a loved one has been in need of health care, or involved in a soup kitchen or a food bank or some such we are largely unaware of these things happening all around us; we might as well be blind and deaf-we often are. I remember to this day how embarrassed I was to discover that a dear friend had had her ears pierced and I had gone for months without noticing. I was seeing the person I expected to see, not the one who was standing in front of me. It does sound like John and his disciples were expecting someone as dramatic as my haloed Jesus and Jesus is asking did you look? Did you see? What did you see? I know that my inability to see my friend's new self is because I let the everyday take over the job of seeing.

There's a drama that happens in our backyard every summer that never fails to surprise me. Our barn is home to a large colony of swallows. It's messy but we think worth it for the number of mosquitos and black flies they eat. And their aerial acrobatics as they come and go through a 6 inch gap in the big barn doors are amazing to watch. We also have hawks-and almost every summer a young one gets so carried away by the hunt he follows the swallows into the barn and is trapped. That 6" gap the swallows plummet through is not visible to the hawk from the inside of the barn, the hawk can't help himself, he's a creature of the open air-he'll die there unless one of us climbs to the 3rd floor and opens a window.

I think Jesus is opening a window, not just for John's disciples but for us. In the second portion of this passage, Jesus asks: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?... What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes?" A hint that unlike the hawk, we can learn. One of the oldest Christian disciplines is being talked about a lot in wellness circles nowadays as "mindfulness". It's nothing more than stopping to really look, hear, feel, to focus on the moment. It's a discipline that might have allowed me to do better by my friend. It is also a practice that can keep us sane at this frenzied time of year. An Advent practice if you will, to bring us back to the genuine, the real. Seeing things around us more clearly allows us to see ourselves more clearly just as this gospel story served in its time to clarify who John really was. The questions Jesus asks here suggest to me a need to look intentionally/ mindfully away from the trappings of power and success so that we can once more find Christ (no visible halo) among us, healing the lame, restoring the blind, comforting the afflicted as he has before and will be again and again.

In closing I want to quote from Abba Anthony of the desert fathers: "Our life and our death are with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God; but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ," he added, "I no longer fear God. I love him".

AMEN