

A Bigger Picture of Jesus

Matthew 11: 2 – 11

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

⁷ As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”*

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

I have a very eclectic taste in Music... there’s not much that I won’t listen to (at least for awhile). And there are some songs that stick with me, for whatever reason. One of those is a tune I remember from a rather unusual band (whose name I can’t remember)... I bought their album back in college – a vinyl LP! – I say unusual because they were a Bluegrass Band from Hawaii. How could you *not* buy that one?

But they did one tune on that album which I remember quite well – and I still play it on the banjo once in while (whenever Dianna lets me get it out of the case!) Its called ‘A Bigger Picture of Jesus’. The first verse is a classic in country wisdom, and it goes like this:

*You gotta’ get yourself a bigger picture of Jesus.
You can’t put him in a frame and set him up on some shelf.
You gotta’ understand, he’s a whole lot more than a famous man,
And a whole lot bigger than the picture that you’ve got of yourself.*

That’s some good theology... I recon!

*He’s a whole lot more than a famous man,
And a whole lot bigger than the picture that you’ve got of yourself.*

I showed a short video at the 530/ 830 services this weekend that was a guy telling a story about how he went to the Mall one day looking for a special shirt to wear at a his wife’s office Christmas party. And while he was there, he said, he saw a young woman wearing a sweat shirt

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that said on it in big letters, “I am the Reason for the Season”. And, you know, he had the same response to that that a lot of us would have had...

He said, I immediately put her in the category of the snobs, “daddy’s little princess” who drives around in her parent’s luxury car... you know what I’m saying? Everything is about *me*. It made him angry! Until sometime later, he had this mental paradigm shift, and heard himself judging her... and it occurred to him. Wait! She actually has it right!

And not just her – its me! **I am** the reason for the season! It’s because of me, because of my sin, my anger, my self-centeredness, my lack of awareness of the needs of others... my willingness to judge someone that I don’t know... I am the reason that God took on flesh... it was for me that this baby was born in Bethlehem – a real place in a real time, born to be God – with – us. Emmanuel. Born to teach us – to show us through his words and actions what Love is really about. Born to take that teaching to the furthest degree possible. Born to die an excruciating death on a Cross. For what? For **me**. For you. **I am** the reason for the season!

John the Baptist came as the one foretold by the prophet Malachi,
*“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”*

So, he is the very one sent by God, in fulfillment of an ancient prophecy to clear the way for the Messiah who was already now on the scene. But he has to send a couple of his disciples to see Jesus, and ask him: *“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”* He had them ask that question, Matthew says, because *he saw what Jesus was doing*.

So, why do you think John – of all people – needed to ask this question? I mean, surely *he* would have known, don’t you think? What was it about Jesus’ actions that made John start to wonder if it was him or not?

Well, the only explanation that makes sense to me is that John needed to confirm Jesus’ identity as Messiah because he *didn’t fit into the picture of Messiah that John expected*. I.e., before he

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even began his public ministry, Jesus was already breaking through all the boxes, categories, stereotypes, preconceived ideas about God, and about the Messiah. And, by extension, he was already breaking through the preconceived ideas about what it means to ‘follow him.’

I can almost hear the twang of those Hawaiian banjo strings... as the song goes on: *“You gotta get yourself a bigger picture of Jesus... You can’t put him in a frame and set him up on some shelf. You gotta’ understand, he’s a whole lot more than a famous man, And a whole lot bigger than the picture that you’ve got of yourself.”*

Jesus says to John’s messengers... *“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”*

Go tell John what you hear and see... share my words with John, and tell him what I’m doing. Tell him what you see: the acts of love. My Compassion. Acts of power. Acts of mercy. Listen as I proclaim Good News – the message of God’s freedom. Notice who I’m sharing that message with: the poor. The Downtrodden, the neglected... the hopeless ones... the sinners... the ones who are running away from God as fast as they can. I’ve come to bring them home.

There is so much impact that the Incarnation brings to us – we’re going to talk about this more next week, and on Christmas eve – but here’s one area of incalculable impact: See, when human beings are left to themselves to ‘ponder’ eternal things... we always get it wrong. Oh, there may be some aspects to God that we get right, ‘on our own’. Paul says that some of God’s attributes, like power, and majesty are evident through the creation. Common sense tells us that all this vast universe can’t just be an accident.

But when it comes to describing the *character* of God – well, that’s where we humans fall woefully short. And we err consistently in the same place: (which is why that song has such truth to me). See, humans tend to picture and describe God as an extension of ourselves. Perhaps our ‘ideal’ self, but, always... us.

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We project our humanity on a grand scale... give it power, and – call the result God. And that's one reason why every other major religion in the world ultimately expresses that we find our eternal destiny by something that *we do ourselves*. Different religions suggest different methods, different paths, but its always about what *we do*.

And then comes the Messiah, Jesus. And everything turns completely about. This is not someone explaining how we can get to God. This is God reaching out to *us*. The Christian faith is set apart from every other religion in that in Christ alone, do we hear a message of *grace*. A message of forgiveness that is based on God's actions, and not on ours.

Human designer gods do not offer grace ... because they are extensions of our own basic, fallen nature. But Jesus – the Word made flesh – does. John had to ask to be sure, because he saw the difference... but Jesus told him., “Look at what I’m doing.” Listen to what I’m saying. Let the words and the deeds lead you to the truth: I am the one. “*Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.*”

Today marks the third weekend of Advent. We've been talking in our current series about how we can prepare to meet our God. We've talked about the preparation of watching, about repentance and confession. Today, I'd like to suggest that we prepare for the Messiah's coming by getting a bigger picture of Jesus. By realizing that he is not like us (thank God!) But that through his indwelling presence, we can be *like him*.

Look at his works, hear his words! And know: This is love... God is grace. Today is a day of joy – and as we're going to sing in just a moment, it is a day of invitation: “Come, Make a Place” for him.

Amen.