

## *Are You the One?*

<sup>NRS</sup> **Isaiah 61:1** The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 7:18** The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples<sup>19</sup> and sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"<sup>20</sup> When the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'"<sup>21</sup> Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind.<sup>22</sup> And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."<sup>23</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

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"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Who was John waiting for? In Deuteronomy 18, Moses tells the Hebrews who are about to cross the Jordan River and enter the land of Canaan that, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet." That promise had been fulfilled over and over. The Lord had raised up Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and others to proclaim God's message to the people. Now, at this time, were the people expecting and hoping for yet another prophet? "In Jesus' day, the 'coming one' could have referred to any one of several figures . . . but it was especially linked to the prophet Elijah, whose return was eagerly awaited."<sup>1</sup> Was John asking, "Are you the return of Elijah?" When we read this question from our vantage point as Christians and as people who know about the events that take place later on, we hear this question as, "Are you God's Anointed One? Are you the expected Messiah?"

The gospels aren't completely clear about the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. We know that they were kin to each other, but not how close the kinship was. Did they know each other in childhood, or not? We don't know. Had Jesus been part of the crowd who followed John the Baptist for some time, or did he suddenly show up one day to be baptized? We don't know. As Luke tells the story, it's not even clear that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, though the other gospels do attest to this.

The way that Luke tells the story, the question is in response to what Jesus has been doing. Luke has just told us about how Jesus healed the slave of a Roman centurion. Remember that Palestine is an occupied territory at this time. Perhaps the local folks in Capernaum liked this Roman officer because they knew him to be a good man, but most people don't take too kindly at living under occupation forces. If you heard in another town that Jesus had done this healing, you might wonder whose side he was on. Was Jesus some sort of collaborator? And if you were John, sitting in prison, a prisoner of the Romans and their toadies, you might be especially sensitive about people who do favors for the establishment that put you in prison!

Luke has also just told us about how Jesus revived the dead son of a widow. But even there, one might ask troubling questions. Did the man deserve to be revived? Was he especially devout or essential to the community in some way? And how about his mother, the widow? Was there something especially significant about her that she should receive this extraordinary blessing? Or was this a random and capricious miracle? And for pity's sake, did Jesus have to flaunt the law by ignoring regulations about cleanliness and dead bodies? Was it necessary to violate the law and tradition? Are these the things a messiah would do? Would God's Anointed One give comfort to the enemy, and trample on the purity code?

John's question can be read in several different ways. Is John, sitting in prison, troubled by uncertainty about Jesus? Is John offended by the inclusiveness and generosity of Jesus' ministry? Or, is John expressing surprise because he expected a fiery reformer and prophet of judgment, but Jesus has come bringing grace and healing? John had certainly been a prophet with a no-holds-barred style. He hadn't

hesitated to call the leaders of the religious establishment a brood of vipers right to their faces. He hadn't minced words with Herod about his shady marital status. Does Jesus seem to be a little soft on sin? Is Jesus below par in the righteous indignation department?

Or, perhaps John is sitting in prison, pretty sure that the only way he will leave prison is feet first. He'd like the reassurance that he's lived to see the beginning of the kingdom of God. He's like old Simeon in the temple when he saw the baby Jesus. "I can depart this life in peace because I've seen your arrival." So, is John expressing eager hope that Jesus is the one whose coming he had announced? Is this an effort to get Jesus to make a public announcement of his identity?<sup>2</sup>

All of these are possible motives behind John's question, "Are you the one, or do we keep waiting?" What did John - and the population in general - expect of a Messiah? For instance, how should God's Anointed One interact with the existing leaders and institutions that are dedicated to the preservation of the faith? Wouldn't you expect the one who God anointed to be a scholar of the law, a preeminent leader in the temple, the shining light among the priests? It was a system where perfection was highly valued, where offerings made to God had to be perfect, without blemish. Those people who were handicapped in some way, who themselves had defects and blemishes, could not even enter some parts of the temple grounds. The congregation had to be kept pure and clean. If you were blind, or lame, or a woman, you were insufficient, you were unsuitable; you were sub-standard, and unworthy to be near the holy presence of God. "Can someone who gives time and attention to the dead, the very poor, the outcast, the acknowledged violator of the law, and the diseased be God's Messiah?"<sup>3</sup>

If you asked most Jews at the time, "What do you pray for? What will the Messiah do when he comes?" the most obvious need was to restore God's people to their long ago glory. When we are again an independent and prosperous nation, then everyone will see the power of God and how God blesses his people. One might read Isaiah 35:4-6 and be filled with hope and expectancy. "Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."<sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;<sup>6</sup> then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." And in that passage the promise of vengeance and recompense would fill you with hope. The references to the blind, the deaf, and the lame would seem like icing on the cake.

What do you do when Jesus turns out to be someone other than who you thought he was or hoped he would be? Well, John sends a couple of disciples to ask, "Are you the one?" And Jesus replies, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."<sup>23</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." It's an unexpected answer. Jesus doesn't say, "Yes, I'm the one who is expected." He doesn't say, "Tell John to hang on. I'm going to be doing the expected release to the captives thing here shortly. He doesn't say, "Die in peace, knowing that I'm taking over before long." He doesn't say, "Go tell John about the challenging sermon that I gave up on the mountain." No, mostly Jesus says, "Tell him what you've seen me do." The kingdom of God, for which people had yearned for ages, was coming into being before their very eyes. It wasn't the kingdom that they expected. It wasn't the kingdom that was obvious to them that they needed. Outcasts were made clean and brought into the community. The poor, who everyone was sure that God despised, obviously are dear to Jesus. What about release for the captives? There John sits in prison. Sometimes we aren't saved in the way we want to be saved from whatever afflicts us.

"People today still judge Jesus by their expectations, instead of pausing and probing into the evidence to see what was really going on."<sup>4</sup> Isaiah had spoken of the eyes of the blind being opened, the deaf would hear, the lame would leap like a deer, and the speechless would sing for joy. Jesus did those things, but he did more than what a literal reading would indicate. Those who had been blind to the beauty of the law, heard how it wasn't just about not killing, but could see that they were to be transformed by letting go of hate. Those who had been deaf to the message that God cared about the downtrodden - heard that they were made in God's image and were loved. Those who had been wandering around in life, lame, stumbling and getting nowhere, found the path that led them into God's kingdom. Those who had no voice in society could sing with joy, knowing that God heard them, really heard them. "All these are obviously

poetic ways of alluding to the joy of the new age when God's goodness will overflow for the blessing" of people in many, many ways.<sup>5</sup>

"If one says that Jesus is the Messiah, then one is saying that in the ministry of Jesus we are seeing what God is doing in the world, what the reign of God really is."<sup>6</sup> We, as the church, are to be the body of Christ. We are to be the continuing manifestation of Christ in the kingdom of God - begun by Jesus, continuing through all of the present, until it is fully realized in a glorious future time. So we must ask ourselves, to what extent are these marks of the Messiah characteristic of the church today? Are we literally helping the blind, the deaf, the lame, the diseased, and the poor? Are we understanding those marks of Jesus' messiah-ship as narrowly as possible or as broadly as possible? Given how Jesus taught about killing, and coveting, and oaths, and other topics, it's pretty clear that Jesus embraced broad understandings. Over and over he said, "You have heard it said - but I say . . ." and what he said was always broader than a literal only understanding of the law.

Jesus said, "Tell John what I've been doing." That's followed by an odd statement. "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." Take offence at Jesus? How could anyone take offence at Jesus, we might wonder. But this may be the hardest lesson in this passage, both for then and today. We take offence at Jesus all of the time, without realizing it. Jesus went around doing good to all he met. He didn't seem to discriminate very much. He gave comfort to the enemy by healing a centurion's slave. He saw a widow going out to bury her son and he revived the man. He taught women as well as men. He discouraged the punishment of an adulterous woman. He talked to a woman with, shall we say, extensive experience, a Samaritan, at that, and failed to publicly condemn her loose behavior. He healed ten lepers, but only one came back to thank him. He let that go unpunished, which could only serve to encourage such irresponsible and ungrateful behavior. I can't think of any instance where Jesus declared that someone was undeserving and refused to help them. He was this kind of loose cannon, firing life and wholeness in whatever direction he was pointed at the moment. He went around doing random, indiscriminate, and undeserving good to people. I confess that I have a hard time with that. I want to be sure that people deserve to be helped. I have a hard time imagining, much less living, in a non-reciprocal way. Loving so wastefully, so generously, so un-judgmentally, seems unreasonable and illogical - and so I find myself taking offense at Jesus. I suspect, if we are honest with ourselves, that we all do. May God have mercy on us for not living and loving with joyful abandon. Amen

<sup>NRS</sup> **Isaiah 35:4** Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."<sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;<sup>6</sup> then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 3:15** As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,<sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.<sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."<sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.<sup>19</sup> But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done,<sup>20</sup> added to them all by shutting up John in prison.<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,<sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 4:15** He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.<sup>16</sup> When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,<sup>17</sup> and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:<sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

<sup>NRS</sup> **Deuteronomy 18:15** The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.<sup>16</sup> This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly

when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die."<sup>17</sup> Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said.<sup>18</sup> I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.<sup>19</sup> Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.<sup>20</sup> But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name, a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak-- that prophet shall die."<sup>21</sup> You may say to yourself, "How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?"<sup>22</sup> If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1995) p 103

<sup>2</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke, NIB, vol IX* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1995) p 160

<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1990) p 100

<sup>4</sup> Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2004) p 88

<sup>5</sup> George A. Buttrick, et.al., *The Gospel According to St. Luke, The Interpreter's Bible, vol. VII* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1952) p 136

<sup>6</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1990) p 100