

Luke 7:18-35—Feb. 17, 2019—Advent Lutheran

“Jesus, are you for real or not?” Now, that’s a huge question—and look who’s asking it! John the Baptizer?! John, who leapt for joy in his mother’s womb in response to the unborn Jesus? John? John who cries out in the wilderness: [*sing*] “Prepare ye the way of the Lord”? Who puts his whole life on the line for Jesus? It’s John, of all people, who wants to know if Jesus is for real. “Are you [really] the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

So, what’s this about? Where is John’s crisis of faith coming from? Well, as always, context matters. So, a couple things to note:

#1 John’s asking his big question from Herod’s prison cell. And, by the way, when I say Herod I’m talking about one of Great King Herod’s sons, Herod Antipas, who was king over Galilee. And when I say “king,” I really mean a puppet king under Rome. ... John got himself in trouble speaking truth to power. He criticized Herod for taking his brother’s wife for himself—while Herod’s brother was still alive and married. John let Herod have it for this and consequently Herod throws him in prison and eventually has him executed. So ... in the darkness of his cell, with time on his hands, and some rumors of Jesus’ ministry, he starts to wonder: “Is Jesus really the one? What if he’s not? What if I’ve put all my eggs in the wrong basket?” We’re talking soul-questions that wake you up in the middle of the night with a cold sweat. John has put his life and his hopes on the line for Jesus, so is it any wonder that he wants to be sure.

#2 I’m not sure Jesus is quite living up to John’s expectations. Right before his imprisonment John threw down this fiery sermon: “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 with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” ... But ... where’s the fire? For sure, Jesus has been doing some good—even miraculous stuff lately, but John is still stuck in jail and Herod is still on his throne, and John’s people are still under the thumb of an oppressive occupying empire. Wasn’t the Messiah supposed to “proclaim release to the captives and let the oppressed go free”? ... Where’s the revolution? ... “Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?”

So, in the last couple months, Nick led a bible study on Luke. (By the way, I really recommend joining up with Nick as he leads bible studies. He does such a good job—no biblical experience necessary; good for the head, good for the soul.) Anyway, in that study we looked at this story, and I confessed then what I will confess to you now: I ask John's question all the time: "Jesus, are you really the one?" That's why I'm here every chance I can; not because I'm filled with certainty, but because I'm not. Now, to be sure, I'm not in prison. To state the obvious, I continue to undeservedly benefit from largely unexamined privilege. But, still, John's question is not unfamiliar to me. ... Standing by an obscene concrete wall in Bethlehem with Nick and friends in 2016, I would've liked to have seen a display of some cosmic power. These faithful people are suffering at the hands of empire. How about some revolutionary fire? How 'bout swooping in and knocking down this ugly wall? ... "Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?" ... Last Sunday through Wednesday, Kathy and I travelled to visit a good friend who some weeks ago suffered a significant stroke. You know, with strokes there is such a contrast between the trauma which happens in a moment and the struggle for recovery, which is such a long, long journey. Her husband told us that people all over the world have been praying for her. And I'm sure those prayers have been heard and reckoned with. But at some primal level I'm yearning for some magic healing from above. "Is this all you got?" ... Well, those are just a couple instances when John's question has been raised for me; there are countless more. ... And, maybe, you too are not a stranger to John's struggle. "Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?"

But do you think maybe John and I have been looking for revolution in all the wrong places? ... What John and many of his siblings in the faith expected and yearned for was that the Messiah would come in and knock Herod and even Caesar off their thrones and usher in the Reign of God, right here, right now ...reestablish the throne of David. ...Think comic superhero. Mighty revolution from on high. And, indeed, there are many passages in the Hebrew scriptures that reinforce such hopes. ...

And, in fact, there are many passages in the New Testament that promise a day when God's reign will be fully realized, when God's justice will fully be established and when "God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain and injustice and wars and sexual assault and racism and misogyny and tyranny and walls and gun violence and guns and strokes will be no more, for the first things will have passed away." There will be a day ... is the promise. Now, how that day will come and when that day will come, of course, has been a matter of endless conjecture through the centuries, but the promise remains.

Someday. ... But in the meantime, what is clear in Luke's gospel is that Jesus did not come to usher in a revolution from the top down, but from the bottom up; a revolution not imposed from on high—superhero style—but a revolution of radical solidarity in, with and under all creation, including all God's children, especially those who had been pushed to the margins. ... A revolution from below—in Luke that's clear from the very beginning. I mean, how did the Promised One arrive? He was birthed by a peasant teenager in a stable, for God's sake. For the first thirty years of his life you hardly hear from him. And when he starts his ministry, there is no swooping down like Thor with thunder and lightning. No, instead he wanders the countryside and eats with and embraces folks considered unworthy by the guardians of the status quo: lepers (whom he touches in spite of a thousand-year taboo against it), lepers, tax collectors, street walkers, Gentiles, demoniacs, poor folk, blind folk, women, children. And he keeps up the revolution from below until the day he dies on a cross in radical solidarity with all creation, including radical solidarity with sinners and with the sinned against. ... And, even now, so many centuries later, the Risen but still Crucified Jesus, is still working his revolution in, with and under all creation, including all God's children, especially those pushed to the margins in our troubled times.

Now, I'm not going to try and explain why God chose to do revolution from below vs. from above. Remember, I'm the guy who still regularly asks John's question. But I do know this: it was the riskier way to go. Swooping down with thunderclaps in a mighty display of cosmic power – no sweat. But for the Creator of the Universe to come in our flesh, flesh that could bleed, flesh that die, to come to be with us as one of us. You talk about risk. You talk about revolutionary. You talk about solidarity. ... You talk about love.

When we were in Bethlehem in 2016, we had the great privilege of worshipping at Christmas Lutheran Church with faithful Palestinian Lutherans. It was Reformation Sunday and, being Reformation, of course, we sang “A Mighty Fortress” – some in English, some in Arabic. And you got the sense the good people of Christmas Lutheran weren’t just singing “A Mighty Fortress,” they were believing it ... not because they expected Jesus the superhero to swoop in at any moment, but because they knew, deep in their bones knew, God in Jesus was with them as one of them and that he would never let them go.

And for our good friend who suffered a stroke, there have been signs a plenty, that God in Jesus was with her when she was attacked and is with her now, bearing her suffering in his wounds and is present in, with and under her doctors, nurses, CNAs, therapists, family, friends to do his healing work. Bearing and working in solidarity with his beloved.

In response to John’s question, Jesus says this: “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.” It may not be the revolution from on high that you expected, John, but the revolution of radical solidarity is alive and will endure till Kingdom come.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” I ask. Maybe you do as well, at least from time to time. ...And so, we come here, to be reminded again and again, that the revolution is still alive and will endure. We come here to remember the promise about the day to come and to remember that in the meantime we are never alone—and when I say “we” I mean all God’s creation including all God’s children. ... We come to remember that the fire of God’s love in Jesus still burns ... maybe, even in our own hearts so that perhaps we too can be revolutionaries in Jesus’ cause. AMEN.