

The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 11, 2016  
Year A, RCL

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Isaiah 35:1-10  
James 5:7-10  
Matthew 11:2-11

Jesus said, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here is an example of a common experience: A friend was showing me a snapshot of a forest. There were a lot of different shades of brown and green. There were old leaves on the ground, trunks of trees, branches, and undergrowth. It was an attractive scene. I glanced at it and was about to hand it back. He said, “What do you see?” This told me that there might be more to see than I had seen yet. I looked again, but still all I saw were trees. “What should I be looking for?” I asked. “There is a deer in the picture,” my friend replied. Sure enough, now that I was looking for it, I could see the deer.

What we see is often affected by what we are looking for, what we expect. The photograph had not changed. I had not changed. The only thing that changed was my expectation.

There is a progression in the themes for this Advent season. First we began with the general theme of hope and expectation as dreamed of the Day of the Lord and the final triumph when Christ comes at the end of time. Last week we focused on what was coming, the Kingdom of God. Now we are confronted with the question of identity: Who is coming?

The prophet Isaiah begins by announcing, ““Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.” What? Where? I find myself looking around the room. Almost comically, I think of looking

under the sofa. No, this is too serious for such facetiousness. John the Baptist is sitting in Herod's dungeon knowing that he is unlikely ever to see the sun or breathe fresh air again. This is a huge question for him. Since his birth his entire life was predetermined to be about preparing people for the arrival of the Messiah. Had he been successful? Was this Jesus the right one? Did he get it right, or had his whole life been a mistake or an illusion? He sends his disciples to Jesus to try to get a straight answer.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see.” Jesus points to the evidence. Now that he has come things happen like those one would expect in the Kingdom of God. “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.” These are exactly what the prophets predicted. These things are happening now that Jesus has arrived. If the effects of the Kingdom show up when Jesus does, what does that make Jesus? What made John question himself is that he had been expecting a different kind of Messiah. He was expecting one who would drive the Romans out and the rich collaborators among the Jewish leaders. His Messiah would re-establish political independence for the Jewish nation as well as religious integrity. Instead, Jesus of Nazareth seemed to be interested in some other kind of Kingdom. John had trouble seeing who Jesus was because of his expectations. Jesus tells John that there is a deer in the picture, so that John could see more clearly.

Then Jesus turns to the crowds and asks them, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.” Notice that Jesus changes the form of

the question. First Jesus asks, “What did you go out to look at?” Perhaps we first came as spectators to be awed and amazed, even entertained by a phenomenon. Perhaps he means, “Why did you go to see John the Baptist? Did you come out for the entertainment? “Hey, Joe, let’s go and see this new preacher. They say he puts on quite a show. Dresses funny and everything.”

Then Jesus changes the question from “What did you go out to look at?” to “What did you go out to see?” What did you go out to perceive, to learn, to take into your life? He suggests that we are no longer an audience, but students, disciples. He invites us no longer to be simply passive onlookers, but engaged participants. Perhaps Jesus means the question a deeper level: “What was it you were looking for when you came to see John the Baptist? What were you hoping for? What longing or hunger did you bring? Or even more personally: What did you yourself hope to find? What do you need from this prophet? What ache in your heart do you need to soothe? What balm in Gilead do you seek? What great vision do you need to give purpose to your life?

These are questions for you and me today as well. Every week we leave our homes and our work to gather in this holy place. We come out to the place of meeting. What is our purpose here? Do we come to be entertained? Do we come to see what the preacher will offer us this week? Do we come here to look at something, or do we come to see? Or do we come to participate in something bigger than ourselves? Do we come searching for something? Do we come to perceive more clearly, to remove those things that hinder our sight? And will our desires and expectations affect what we are able to see of Jesus?

What we need will affect what we seek in Jesus. If we are hungry, we seek one who can feed thousands with a few fish and loaves of bread. If we are sick, we seek one who can heal us. If we are burdened with guilt, we seek one who can forgive. If we are embroiled in conflict or

are suffering in a broken relationship, we seek one who can make peace and reconcile us. If we are enslaved by any form of addiction, we seek one who can break the bonds of slavery. And if we are dead or dying, we seek one who can raise us from the grave.

We do not come just to look; we come to see. We come to learn. We come to give ourselves to the King who comes among us. We come to the altar to offer ourselves to God and to receive God in the sacrament. We come to be changed.

This is why the very least of us is greater than John the Baptist. It is not because we are better than John. We are not more holy or more dedicated. We do not have more courage. What makes us greater is not what is in us or what we do, but what God does in us. John prepares the way, builds a road for the exiles to come home. John points to the Messiah and says, "There he is. That is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." But we are given a greater task. We are given a greater gift of which we are not worthy. We are given Christ himself to be the Body of Christ in this time and place. We bear God in our bodies from the altar to the streets, from this house to our homes, from this fellowship into our society.

The name for this great mystery is Holy Communion. This is the mystery that we will celebrate in fourteen more days. God came among us and dwells with us, among us, and in us. God takes on human flesh in the babe at Bethlehem, in Jesus Christ, and in us.

So there are three questions that Jesus asks us this morning. What did you come out to look at? What are you to see? And finally, what do you come out to become?