

Don't Miss This

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Third Sunday of Advent
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This month I am in the final phase of my transition to Boston as I sell my property in Delaware. Since I will not be present at the closing, all those involved send me packets of documents. They are loaded with little yellow stickies that say "read this" and "sign here." My good realtor, God love her, is not going to let me skip any of the fine print. She keeps me on track so that I don't miss anything important. I am grateful that someone calls my attention to details that I might otherwise miss. It's a good way to do business long distance, and I also think it's a good way to share our faith journeys in the Church. Sometimes we need to point out the details to one another. We need stickies that direct our attention to Christ and say "don't miss this."

With all this in mind, I have renewed sympathy for John the Baptist in today's gospel story. I have always felt for this man as we see him in Matthew's 11th chapter. Here is the fervent prophet who proclaimed the coming of Christ. He is one of the most colorful characters in the New Testament. We met him just last week as he presided in the wilderness and drew big crowds with his fiery preaching. John is steeped in the Holy Scriptures. But even he needs some yellow stickies in his Bible that say "read this." John the Baptist has missed some important details about the Messiah and as a result, he is puzzled by Jesus.

John knows his Bible and can quote Isaiah and the ancient prophecies about the Messiah. Generations dreamed of a wise and just ruler who would heal their nation and restore the faithful community. The Messiah would come with fire and a winnowing fork and really sort things out. That's who John has proclaimed: God's appointed deputy who will take names and whip everyone into shape. But John has missed some important details. He has only half the job description of the Messiah. He has overlooked the part about healing. He has forgotten that God sends the Messiah out of love for creation and wants to save it. The Messiah is a rescue effort on God's behalf. John has lost track of these details. He has read only half the memo and is confused. Jesus is not what he expected.

Now John is in prison. And from his dank cell he sends a poignant message to Jesus: "*Are you the one who is to come or are we to await another?*" Read between the lines here: Are you really the messiah I preached about? Are you the one I have risked my life for? Was I mistaken? "*Are you the one who is to come or are we to await another?*" That simple sentence is loaded. We the readers know that we are just paragraphs away from John's execution. Time is running out and he is not sure. His plaintive question touches something deep within us. If John the Baptist has not fully understood Jesus, the rest of us have probably missed some things, too. John expected fire and brimstone and got something else. He is confused because he thinks Jesus does not act like the Messiah. We may not be looking for judgment day, but we want certainty about Jesus. And sometimes he does not act the way we want either. If John had doubts about Jesus, surely

we can name ours, too. Is he really the one we want to follow, or should we wait for another?

John's question blesses ours and permits us to explore our doubts and our hopes, especially in this Advent season. If Jesus is coming as we proclaim, what does he do and what difference does it make? War still rages, the gap between the rich and the poor grows wider every year, and global warming is killing entire species of trees in our forests. Jesus is coming but we are still fighting with our spouses, restless in our jobs, and here at Trinity we hear every week about a new case of cancer among our parishioners. Our families are dispersed, our friends are distracted and we hunger for community. We sing carols about Jesus at Christmas and secretly wonder, "*Are you the one who is to come or are we to await another?*"

Today in 2007, it could well be that this question reflects our search for God's authority in our life. I don't mean a list of rules or a divine dictator. However, I do believe we long for a moral authority that names the gap between good and evil, right and wrong, sense and nonsense in our public and private life. We do not have leaders who can sustain moral authority and we probably never will on a large scale. They are human. Where can we turn to find a steady moral compass in the modern world? Or to say it in an old fashioned way, who will lead us in righteousness? Will it be Jesus? Give us the details so we can be sure. Put some yellow stickies around where we can see them. "*Are you the one who is to come or are we to await another?*"

Now here is a yellow sticky – listen to this: when Jesus responds to John the Baptist's question, what he does not say is nearly as important as what he does say. Jesus does not say, "You don't get it, John. You should have prepared better and done a more thorough job." He does not say, "If only you believed you would not have to ask questions." Jesus also does not rattle off his perfect grasp of the scriptures. Instead, Jesus points to the evidence. He sends a reassuring message to our prophet in prison: "*Go and tell John...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...*"

You might say that Jesus is a results-oriented leader. He does not even talk about himself in this litany; he just names the miracles all around him. And in his next breath he extols the doubting prophet and says, "*no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.*" Do not miss this detail: Jesus does not condemn John's doubt, he praises his faithfulness. In the same way, our doubts are not nearly as important to Christ as our fidelity.

And there is more: read this and sign here. Jesus acts with moral authority throughout the gospel and creates a place at the table for those who are unsure and may have missed the Messiah memo. Jesus' authority replaces moral blindness with insight. His authority leads us toward righteousness, which is another way of describing right relationships with God and everybody else. All the evidence about Jesus points to authority that is grounded in God and not in the whims and intrigues of the day. It is a new kind of evidence that Jesus Christ is Lord.

John the Baptist wrestled with doubt in the confines of a prison cell and was reminded that Christ's ministry is bigger and more transforming than he had imagined.

We live in times of doubt in today's world. Our imaginations are easily imprisoned, and can narrow the path of faith. Following Jesus opens us to the miracle of God's love and leaves evidence all around us. Pay attention to the details; don't miss the evidence of Christ in your life. There is a trail of yellow stickies behind you and there are bound to be more up ahead. They are there for all to see as we make our journey together in Christ.

Glory to God whose power, working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.