

March 30, 2014  
The Life of John the Baptist

*John's Question*  
Matthew 11:1-6

**Opening words:** Lent is the Christian season of preparation prior to Easter. Excluding Sundays, it lasts for 40 days. The number forty is one of those sacred numbers in the Bible. It rained for 40 days and nights in Noah's story. The Hebrews wandered for 40 years before entering into the Promised Land. Jesus fasted 40 days before being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. The resurrected Jesus walked the face of this world for 40 days before ascending into heaven. This year Easter is April 20, so Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, was March 5.

Lent is the time to examine yourself and discover what is holding you back for a closer walk with God. How easy it is to see the imperfections in others and be blind to our own. We look good next to the cast of characters on the evening news wearing the orange jump suits. However, comparing ourselves to Jesus is another story. Our imperfections are suddenly clear. The Wesleyan tradition has always encouraged us to strive toward perfection. We should never be satisfied with our present state, because none of us is perfect.

This year's Lenten sermon series is called *The Life of John the Baptist*. This is sermon number four in this 6-part sermon series. To date, we have looked at the birth and the message. Last time, we looked at Jesus's baptism. Next week, we will look at John's death. On Pentecost, June 8, we will return to John and look at his legacy. However, today I want to look at John's question. May God give you ears to hear this morning's Gospel lesson, Matthew 11:1-6. Let me call this message, *John's Question*.

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**Matthew 11:1-6** <sup>1</sup>After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>2</sup>When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples <sup>3</sup> to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

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

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Isidor I. Rabi was born in Eastern Europe, but came to America as an infant. In time, he would study physics at MIT, Columbia and Cornell. He must have been a good student. In 1942, he won the Nobel Prize in physics. A friend once asked him how he became a scientist. He credited his mother. He said, every day after school his mother would talk to him about his school day. She wasn't so much interested in what he had learned.

She was more interested in what he asked. She always inquired, "Did you ask a good question today?" "Asking good questions," Rabi said, "made me become a scientist."

Asking good questions is important. They make us better people. At the very heart of this morning's scripture lesson is an excellent question. The answer to that question changed everything. So if you are ready to look at John's question for Jesus, say, **"Amen!"**

When we last left John the Baptist, his life was good. You remember the story. He had left the city and was living in the wilderness. In that remote location he had one message, repent! He told people to repent and he showed people to resist self-indulgence. He wore clothes made of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. In every way possible, he communicated to his generation to return to God. That message of repentance resonated with his generation and people came to him. They came to John to be baptized as a sign of their repentance. Those must have been exciting days in his life, but it suddenly got even better. One day he was looking into that sea of sinful faces and he saw something new. He saw the only sinless face in the history of the world, Jesus. After some encouragement, John baptizes him and the rest is history. God identifies him as the long awaited Messiah, and the history of the world would change forever. In the Gospel lesson for today, John is experiencing the other side of life. His life had become very hard.

According to the scripture lesson for today, John is in prison. The openness of the wilderness has been replaced by the smallness of a prison cell. He is there for one reason. He had made an enemy in high places. John refused to soften the truth for any man, including Herod Antipas. His story sounds like the storyline from a soap opera. Herod went to Rome to visit his brother, and became infatuated with his sister-in-law. He seduced her, took her home and divorced his wife. (That would be like me seducing and marrying my sister-in-law, Sue. I'm sorry! I just went blind for a second.) That story was common knowledge in that society and John pronounced it as morally wrong. His protests came to the attention of Herod Antipas, who imprisoned John near the Dead Sea. Next week, we will find out there is no happy ending for John. Yet, from his prison cell, John still has influence.

Like Jesus, all great teachers had students or disciples who believed in them. John sends his disciples to Jesus with a single question, *Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?* That is a great question. As a matter of fact, it is found in both Matthew and Luke. However, the issue that haunts the entire text is *why* he asked it. He knew the answer to the question. He knew Jesus was the Messiah. You remember the stories. Mary, Jesus's mother, went to Elizabeth, John's mother, during her pregnancy. John leaped in his mother's womb! (Luke 1:44) Years later, John baptized Jesus. He had a clear understanding of God's plan of salvation for the world. He knew Jesus was sinless.

John was present when God said, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*" (Matthew 3:15) Those stories are part of John's story. He knew Jesus was the Messiah, so why did he ask the question, *Are you the one who was to come, or should I expect someone else?* For years, Biblical students have tried to understand why John sent his disciples.

### **Doubt**

Last Sunday morning, I found myself at the District Lions Convention in Hudson, Ohio. I had a great time for a variety of reasons. One of the reasons was personal. It was like taking a mini vacation in the middle of Lent. I preached at 8:00 on Sunday morning and had an opportunity to worship with my daughter and son-in-law at 11:00. When I walked into the meeting room before I preached, I was greeted by a gentleman at the door. He looked at me and said, "Don't forget to pray for the people in Garrettsville." I hadn't heard the news. I asked, what happened in Garrettsville? He told me about the fire that took down a large portion of their historic downtown. When I was done preaching, I went back to my room and looked at the news. The reporter told me about the cause of the fire and the estimated dollar amount of the damage. There were all kinds of videos of the blaze. Over the next couple of days, meetings were held to inform the public of the damage. The reporter interviewed some of the residents of that community. I expected to see a surplus of emotions. Instead of sad faces, I saw determined faces. The people weren't lamenting about their loss; they were talking about their future. One guy spoke for them all. He said, "We are going to rebuild a bigger and better downtown". Never underestimate the power of the human spirit.

Some people believe John asked Jesus the question, "*Are you the one who was to come, or should I expect someone else?*" because his faith had grown frail and he began to doubt. They point to the harshness of the prison cell and say that John had become a broken man. Don't believe it. If it is true of the citizens of Garrettsville, Ohio, then it is true of John the Baptist. Hardships have a way of flexing spiritual muscles, not destroying them. I have never met a person who doubted in the midst of a crisis. The other night I was texting a family who had lost a loved one. The deceased was a healthy man 30 days ago prior to his death. I texted, "I am praying for you!" The answer came back, "Don't worry. Our faith is strong." John the Baptist didn't ask the question because he was consumed with doubts. Hardships have a way of strengthening our faith. It can't be doubt. Perhaps, he asked the question because he was simple disappointed.

### **Disappointment**

In 1858, the Illinois legislature--using an obscure statute--sent Stephen A. Douglas to the U.S. Senate instead of Abraham Lincoln, although Lincoln had won the popular vote. When a sympathetic friend asked Lincoln how he felt, he said, "Like the boy who stubbed his toe: I am too big to cry and too badly hurt to laugh." If you have ever held a leadership position in the life of the church, then you can relate to that story.

How many times has the church disappointed you? Our dreams and our reality seldom match. You dreamed of having some big youth event. You knew it was going to be big, so you bought everything you needed. You bought a gallon of mustard and ketchup, as well as several jumbo packages of hot dogs and buns. You even rented a van to transport the crowd and told everyone it was going to be big. The big day came and only five kids showed up. Two of them were yours. You were both disappointed and embarrassed. You never tried it again. Or you dreamed of having a big concert. The sanctuary was going to be full of people praising Jesus. You mailed all the letter and put up all the posters around town. You promoted it with your mouth and told everyone to come early, because the sanctuary was going to fill up fast. At the magic hour of the big concert, only 32 people came who complained the music was too loud. There is no other way to say it. You were disappointed and embarrassed. You never tried again. There is no other way to say it. Disappointment is part of the church. I have no clue how many hours I have spent writing sermons that only a handful have heard.

Maybe that is John's story. His dreams of what it would like when the Messiah came and his present reality didn't match. He expected greatness but he got prison. Maybe his was disappointed? Maybe he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask Jesus the question, *Are you the one who was the come, or should I expect someone else?*, as a sign of his disappointment? The Messiah was to bring victory, not defeat. The problem is, that interpretation doesn't match up with John's personality. Everywhere else in scripture it says he is open to God's will. The answer can't be disappointment.

### **Discipleship**

I think our first two options are completely wrong. I don't believe John had his disciples ask the question because of doubt. I don't believe John had his disciples ask the question because of disappointment. I think he had his disciples ask the question because of discipleship. John knew the answer to the question. He knew Jesus was the Messiah, the savior of the world, God's perfect sacrifice. John wanted to make sure his disciples knew Jesus as their Savior. Jesus answered their question by referring to Isaiah 35. In that chapter, the prophet told the world the Messiah would heal the blind, the lame, the diseased and the deaf. The Messiah would also resurrect the dead and preach the good news to the poor. Jesus is telling John's disciples that he was the Messiah. John had told his disciples ask about Jesus, but he wanted them to experience Jesus for themselves. There is a world of difference between learning about Jesus and experiencing Jesus! If you can agree with that statement, say, "**Amen!**"

Years ago, I sat in the basement of the Hathaway United Methodist Church in Garfield Heights with a young woman by the name of Nancy. The Sunday before, she had visited that church for the first time. As the pastor, I contacted her because I wanted to get to know her better. We clicked in the first few minutes as she told me her story. She had just been discharged from the Navy and moved back home to attend college. She was studying to be a nurse, and confessed it was hard for her living at home with her mother.

She went as far as to tell me her mother was mad at her for visiting a Methodist church, because she had been raised Catholic. She felt disconnected from the Catholic Church during her time in the Navy. During those years she tried various Christian traditions and had read the Bible cover to cover. Near the end of our discussion, she looked at me and said, "I know everything there is to know about Jesus, but I'm still not sure I am going to heaven when I die." I looked at Nancy and said, "There is a world of difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus." I asked her if she knew Jesus as her Lord and Savior. She shook her head no, and I led her to salvation.

Can anyone here relate to Nancy's story? You know everything there is to know about Jesus. You go to church and read the Bible. You pray for the sick and read your devotional. However, you still aren't sure about your own salvation. John the Baptist knew it from the very beginning. You can know all about Jesus and still not know Jesus. He sent his disciples to Jesus with the question so they could experience Jesus for themselves. Do you know Jesus, or do you just know about Jesus? Until you know Jesus, you know nothing at all!

Will you pray with me?