



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Shall we look for another?

Luke 7:18-35

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One of my favourite teachers in high school was devoted to preparing his students for the real world. He was mainly a “vocational education” teacher and that meant he was very down-to-earth and he spent a lot of time trying to get his students grounded as well. He was very fond of a famous quote from Thomas Edison: “Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.” That was just what a bunch of privileged upper middle-class teenagers needed to hear, because whether we realised it or not, we sort of expected everything in life to be handed to us. He wanted to be sure we didn’t miss our opportunities in life simply because we didn’t know what to look for or didn’t know what to expect.

We miss lots of things because they aren’t what we expect—they don’t fit our preconceived notions. They’re often right in front of us, but we’re blind to them. Today’s lesson from St. Luke’s Gospel is a warning and an exhortation. It’s a warning about the possibility of missing Jesus because he doesn’t look like what we might expect in a Messiah, but it’s also an exhortation to live in hope, knowing that he has, in fact, won the victory over sin and death. We may sometimes be looking in the wrong places, holding misguided expectations, or we may simply be blind. Our lesson reminds us that Jesus came to give sight to the blind. He’s the one who opens the eyes of faith. Look at Luke 7:18-20:

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying,

‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’”

Back in Chapter 3 we read that not everyone received John’s preaching of the “good news” as good. He had openly rebuked Herod and his wife (who also happened to be his former sister-in-law) for having divorced their previous spouses so that they could enter into a marriage that the law ruled incestuous. John’s message was a call to repentance and neither Herod nor Herodias appreciated that call. As a result John had been imprisoned. Now he hears “all these things”. Luke’s specifically referring to Jesus’ healing of the centurion’s servant at Capernaum and of his raising the widow’s son at Nain. No doubt John’s disciples also told him about earlier events and about Jesus’ “love thy enemy” teaching. John heard about Jesus feasting—and not only feasting, but feasting with tax collectors and sinners. And he was confused. It even sounds as though he was experiencing at least a little bit of doubt. What Jesus was doing didn’t look like what anyone expected the Messiah to be doing. What he was preaching wasn’t what anyone expected the Messiah to be preaching. John shared many of the same mistaken ideas that the Jews had about what the Messiah would be like. But consider too John’s ministry and his way of life. John was an ascetic who lived in the desert. He wore rough clothes. Matthew and Mark say they were made of camel hair—not exactly comfortable—and that he ate locusts and wild honey. He preached the coming day of the Lord, which to everyone in that world meant judgement and “doom and gloom”. John was in that world something like the modern preacher on the street corner wearing a sign that says, “The End is Near” while preaching repentance. In contrast, while Jesus may be poor, he and his disciples are feasting and celebrating—just the opposite of John. But maybe what really got to John was the fact that there he was, the Messiah’s herald, stuck in Herod’s prison. If Jesus were really the Messiah, how did this happen and why wasn’t he doing anything to get him out?

Now, remember, that John *knew* Jesus was the Messiah. But what was going on? Despite *knowing*, he was still *doubting*. Why? Because, just like the rest of his people, he didn’t really understand the Messiah’s ministry. The same thing happens today and to many of us. We *know* that Jesus is the Messiah, and yet when bad things happen, when we get sick, when we lose a job, when a relationship breaks down, when our children walk away from Jesus our first response is to pray—and that’s exactly what we should do. In prayer we entrust our situation to God. The problem is that because we misunderstand God’s plan—or presume to know it too well—or because we misunderstand the ministry of Jesus just as John did, we use our prayers to do more than entrust the situation to God. We try to tell God *how* he *should* fix our situation based on our wrong ideas of who he is and how he works—as if we know better than he does. And then when he doesn’t do what we expect, we start to doubt. Some even lose faith. Most often our mistake is that we assume that Jesus will work today the same way he worked during his earthly ministry and miraculously resolve our earthly problems. What we forget is that his earthly ministry was preparation for his final and eternal ministry. Before he could conquer sin and death for eternity, he had to show that he was the one who could win that victory. He had to demonstrate his Lordship in earthy ways—sort of sacramental signs pointing to an eternal and much more profound reality. Remember, sacramental signs point to greater spiritual and eternal truths. They give us reason here and now to trust the God we can’t see with our eyes or the Jesus whose resurrection we can only know through the accounts of eye-witnesses two millennia ago.

But rather than scolding John for his doubts and questions, Jesus uses this as an opportunity to educate the people about his *real* ministry and his *real* nature. Look at verses 21-23:

In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you

have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are you the One?” And when they find Jesus, he’s in the midst of a crowd, healing diseases and casting out demons. Imagine, Jesus busy healing these people and John’s disciples pushing their way through the crowd and then struggling to get his attention so that they can ask if he’s the One. It’s a humorous image. It’s like walking up to a chef when he’s in the middle of preparing a banquet and juggling umpteen pots and pans on a big stove and asking, “Are you the chef?” And Jesus turns to them a little like the chef and responds, “What do you think? Look around you. The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor finally have hope because they’ve heard the good news.” The man at the stove might not be dressed like we’d expect a chef to be dressed; he may not be preparing the dishes we expected; but he’s at the stove and sending food out to the banquet; people are eating and enjoying themselves. Obviously he’s the chef. And that’s what Jesus is getting at. In his response, he takes John’s disciples back to Isaiah and his prophecies about the Messiah coming to establish God’s kingdom: sight to the blind, healing the lame, and preaching good news to the poor. Yes, the Jews put their own spin on Isaiah’s prophecy (and the other prophets too), but that doesn’t change the fact that Jesus is the one prophesied. He’s doing all the things that had been promised. They were expecting beef; he’s making salmon instead, but it’s nevertheless the great banquet that has been promised. And Jesus reminds them that none of this should be a surprise. When Simeon had rejoiced over him in the temple some thirty years before, he had prophesied that Jesus would be the “fall and rising of many in Israel”, but blessed are those who can see past the scandal, who can see Jesus and his

kingdom and God’s salvation breaking into the world.

At this point, Jesus realises that John’s not the only one with questions. There was a crowd gathered there and many of them had heard the exchange between him and John’s disciples. And so Jesus takes advantage of the situation to teach the whole crowd.

When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings’ courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.” (Luke 7:24-27)

Jesus is asking the people who they think John is. Many of these people were following Jesus precisely because they had first followed John and received his baptism. John had prepared them for Jesus’ ministry. But, then, what *is* Jesus’ ministry? That’s the question at the heart of the passage and so Jesus turns to John to answer it. Again, who is John? He asks the people who they went to the wilderness to see. “A reed shaken by the wind?” This was a reference to Herod. One of Herod’s symbols was a reed. It was stamped on his coins. Maybe Jesus even held on up as he asked them this. Jesus’ question hits at two points: Did you go out to see some weak, namby-pamby preacher in the wilderness who blows around like a reed? No. They went out to hear John the Baptist preach fire and brimstone and to condemn corrupt Herod, the king with a reed on his coins. John wasn’t the sort of preacher who tickled itching ears, but as the forerunner of the Messiah, neither was he kingly. Did you go out looking for a man in soft clothes—like a Herod or one of his nobles? Most people associated the

coming Messiah with the king. If Herod was grand and dressed in fine clothes, the Messiah and his herald ought to be dressed in even finer clothes. But no. They went out to the wilderness to see a very different herald. John wore camel’s hair. Did you go out to see a prophet? Yes! You went to hear John because he was preaching with conviction something the people never would have heard from the palace or from the wealthy and powerful people invested in the status quo. They went to hear John because he was like the prophets Israel had known in the old days: Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and others.

Jesus reminds the people: You went out to see John, because he’s the one prophesied by those old prophets. In verse 27 Jesus calls to mind the whole covenant and all of God’s promises to Israel as he mashes together Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20. In Exodus—at the very beginning of Israel’s history—God had promised one day to send his messenger and through Malachi, at the end of the Old Testament—one of the last of the prophets—he again promised to send his messenger to prepare the way. Jesus is saying, “That’s John—the one you’ve been expecting since God led you out of Egypt and all through your trials and tribulations. And yet John is more than a prophet. He’s the one who draws the whole prophetic ministry of the Old Covenant together. He takes all those strands from more than a thousand years of history and revelation and he braids them into a cord that leads straight to Jesus. But what does that mean for Jesus? And what does it mean for his people. Look at verse 28:

I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

So, again, what does this mean for Jesus? The whole point of John’s questions on that day had to do with who Jesus was. Was he really the Messiah? Because he didn’t really look like what they expected. If John was more than a prophet—if he was the consummation of the Old Covenant’s

prophetic ministry then that must mean that the one he has heralded is—so to speak—“*more than* more than a prophet”! He must be the Messiah. And that means that as the Messiah, Jesus is inaugurating the new kingdom that everyone had been waiting for. It’s full of poor people; formerly blind, sick, and dead people; and even—gasp!—gentiles, but all those poor people and outsiders, because of their new kingdom and new covenant status, have something that even John didn’t have. John was still part of the Old Covenant that pointed to the New. Those who have heard the good news and are in Christ are now part of his New Covenant.

At this point, Luke breaks in with his own commentary. If the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than even John, how is the kingdom defined? How does a person get into it or what characterises it? Look at verses 29 and 30:

(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)

Baptism was the key. John’s baptism summed up his message. He preached repentance and prepared people for Jesus and it was through baptism—through washing—that they took hold of his good news. And Luke even emphasises that even the tax collectors—outsiders of the worst sort—took part in that baptism. That emphasises just how different this kingdom is from the old one. To refuse John’s baptism was to refuse his message and to refuse to repent. As he said back in 3:7, those who refused repentance might be Abraham’s *biological* children, but they were the *spiritual* children of the Serpent. To refuse baptism and to refuse repentance was to reject God’s good news—which is what the Pharisees and their lawyers did. In contrast, to repent through baptism was to “justify God”—to assent or agree to his saving plan for humanity

and in doing so to give him a form of honour. Luke uses this to sum up what Jesus has said and to lead into what he has to say about the people of that day:

“To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.” (Luke 7:31-35)

This generation—and Jesus is referring to all those who have rejected John’s baptism and message of repentance and as a result have turned aside from the path that leads from John to Jesus—this generation is stubborn and stiff-necked—just like the generation that grumbled against the Lord and against Moses as they were being led from their Egyptian slavery into freedom. God is being gracious, but they can’t see his grace for what it is. Ultimately there’s no pleasing them. Jesus compares them to brats playing in the street. The other children invite them to play a fun and happy dancing game, but they refuse. They aren’t in the mood for playing that game. So the kids, wanting them to join in, decided to play at a funeral game, but that’s no good either. We’ve all met people like this. They criticise you for one thing and then when you change to try to satisfy them, suddenly that’s no good either.

John, the forerunner came like one of the Old Testament prophets to preach repentance, and so it was appropriate that he lived the life of an ascetic. Something was wrong and he was anticipating God’s coming to judge and to vindicate and so he “fasted and prayed”. But that was no good. The people who rejected him justified their

rejection by saying that John must have had a demon. But now Jesus has come—the one who has come to manifest God’s presence. He’s the one John fasted and prayed for and so with his coming, he’s brought feasting and celebration, which shows in itself the nature of his ministry of bringing the good news. But that’s no good either. Ultimately, the problem isn’t the behaviour; it’s the people who have determined in their hearts to reject God’s plan for saving his people and his creation.

In contrast, Jesus says, “Wisdom is justified by all her children.” Think of “Wisdom” in the Old Testament. In Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon, and in Sirach wisdom is often portrayed as a woman who calls out for men and women to follow her. She represents God’s good will for his people. To walk in or with this woman, Wisdom, is to submit to the way of life that the Lord has laid out in Scripture and specifically in this case, to submit to the lordship that Jesus has manifested as the Messiah—to repent, to be baptised, and to walk with him in faith as he makes everything new.

So Jesus uses John’s doubting questions as an opportunity to explain his purpose and his ministry. He uses John’s questions to again assert his Messiahship—his role as Saviour and as Lord. And in doing that he leaves us with a choice. We can choose to submit to the lordship of Jesus and to submit to God’s saving plans and through that to be blessed as we take part in his victory over sin and death. Or we can be like the Pharisees and lawyers for whom nothing was good enough. They had their expectations of what the Messiah would do and what he’d be like and because they weren’t willing to set aside those false ideas, they rejected Jesus and brought God’s judgement on themselves. They were so convinced that God was going to work in one particular way that when he manifested himself and was working right under their noses, they missed him. Again, think of the silly scene of John’s disciples approaching Jesus as he was healing the sick and giving sight to the

blind. They had to interrupt his messianic work to ask him if he was really the Messiah. And Jesus pointed them to what he was doing and sent them back to John: “Am I the Messiah? Go back to tell John how you saw me doing everything that the Messiah is supposed to be doing.” But the Pharisees, even as Jesus fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophets—what was written in Scripture—were still blind to God at work. They refused to open their eyes even as Jesus was right there with them. They saw the chef preparing the banquet with his own hands—saw him with their own eyes—but wilfully and flat-out refused to accept him as the chef.

Brothers and sisters, let this be a warning to us. Let us never miss God working in our midst and in our lives because we refuse to let him open our eyes and correct our pre-conceived notions of how he’s supposed to work. We do this in all sort of different ways. A few years ago Veronica met another Christian at a homeschool function and they started talking about church. They woman asked her: “What is God doing in your church?” And Veronica started telling her all the wonderful things going on here, but the woman stopped her and said, “No. That’s not what I meant. What “signs and wonders” is God doing in your church?” This woman was convinced that God only manifests himself in overtly “miraculous” ways. The conversion of sinners into saints, the transformation of hearts and minds, the bearing of the fruit of the Spirit didn’t qualify as “God’s work” for her. I think of people who have claimed that this or that person somehow doesn’t have the Holy Spirit because he or she doesn’t speak in tongues—or the people who themselves question where they stand with the Spirit because they lack a certain gift or a certain experience. This was the error for which St. Paul rebuked the Corinthians. We are not to look for miraculous gifts as evidence of the Spirit: we look for the profession that Jesus is Lord and for the growth of the fruit of the Spirit in a person’s life—for the transformation that the Spirit makes in all who are in Christ. If we get stuck

on one particular gift as *the* evidence of the Spirit, we become blind to all the other ways that God works in amazing ways in the lives of his saints. I think of Christians who are stuck thinking that God will only work through one kind of Church or one kind of ministry or one way of doing things and they miss opportunities to serve the kingdom as it manifests itself in new way—like those who rejected John because he was too ascetic or Jesus because he was too much the life and soul of the party. We miss God at work in other ways. When we’re in the midst of trials and tribulations, we often make the mistake of thinking that the only way God works is to remove the problem, but the fact is that the most profound sorts of ministry and witness happen as we persevere through these problems in hope and faith. I think of Christians who are discouraged and feel inadequate because they aren’t in full-time ministry or because they aren’t professional missionaries, but in their discouragement they overlook the missionfield in their own homes and the ways in which God is working through them in their families, in their workplace, and in their church. When I was in University I once talked with the chaplain of our student ministry about my own doubts. I looked at the passion and ministry of some of my friends and felt inadequate. I sometimes questioned my own status with God because I didn’t show the same kind of passionate emotions they did and because I just couldn’t seem to manage the same kind of ministry they were doing. And he gave me a rebuke and an exhortation at the same time. He reminded me that every one of us is different: in our personality, our character, our abilities, and our gifting. That’s part of the beautiful diversity of the body of Christ. Each of us needs to bloom where we’re planted. We need to be open to God working with who we are and what we have, not obsessing over duplicating the experience and ministry of other Christians. Doing that is a sure-fire way to miss seeing God at work and to drive ourselves in a defeatist mindset.

Brothers and sisters, study the Scriptures. That’s where we see God at

work. It’s where he tells us how he works and dispels are false ideas. But most importantly, be open to God working in ways you might not expect. Where you see his kingdom manifest, his Good News proclaimed, his Spirit at work, the Holy Trinity being given glory, and the truth revealed in his Word honoured you can be sure that he is at work whether it’s as we expected or not. As Jesus said to John’s disciples, “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, keep our eyes open to see you at work. As we ground ourselves in your Word, teach us to follow as you lead. And work through us for the sake of your kingdom as we commit to walking with you in faith. We ask this in through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.