

Sermon Text for June 2, 2024

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Isaiah 35:5-7, Matthew 11:1-6

What is going on?

I often remain amazed at the suitability of the passages of Scripture that I am led to choose when I put my sermon list together months ahead of time. What is going on can be our sermon title for many life situations in which we find ourselves, but today in our current political climate it seems especially pertinent. To us things seem to be moving in a direction that is historical and so something that we have never seen before. We have never seen a President convicted as a felon and so it seems like a big deal and it seems like important and nation changing events are taking place.

But you know me, I always try to look at things through the lens of Scripture and try to understand what God is telling us in this time and in this place and so when we are asking what is going on, in Matthew we find Jesus who is dealing with a cousin who is in prison and who will eventually end up with his head on a platter because of the political whims of Herod. Today it is hard for some of you maybe to focus on Jesus when all around you the papers and your friends and the people that you surround yourself with are telling you either the end of the world is coming or are telling you that finally the end of an era has arrived.

But here, this morning, what we do here is practice for what we have to do in the world as well. Once we leave this room we put into practice what we are learning. What are we learning here? Righteousness, how to act according to the will of God. Because we cannot define our lives, or take our identity, we can't understand what is important to us based upon what culture tells us is important. Whatever is going on, we can't be distracted by it and lose our focus on Jesus here in church and out there in our daily lives.

If nothing else Jesus consistently tells us what should be important to us. Anything that distracts us from what Jesus tells us is important is a waste of time. What should be our priority? What should be important to us? Giving the blind their sight, helping the lame to walk, cleansing the leper, giving hearing to the deaf, raising the dead, and preaching the good news of the Gospel to the poor. Everything else is us chasing after the wind. Let's read our Scripture in Matthew this morning.

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The gist of this entire Scripture in Matthew is John the Baptist asking Jesus what is going on? He frames it in the question: Are you the one? When life events happen we want to be able to ask God very directly what is going on? This is true both in the tragic, when we are forced to come to terms with a loss or a very bleak future we want to know from God what is going on? Conversely when this church received the incredibly generous inheritances in the forefront for me was this very, very heavy responsibility where I asked God what is going on? Because I know that to whom much is given much is required. Throughout our entire lives we ask this question over and over again as we try to figure out how to raise our kids and every single day we ask that question: what is going on?

Here, John the Baptist is asking a very specific question that may not enter our mind. John the Baptist knew his Scripture and he knew his cousin, Jesus from the time that they were born months apart. John knew who Jesus was and he knew at Jesus' baptism when the heavens opened as he was baptizing Jesus and God the Father said for everyone to hear: This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. So this question comes a bit out of the blue for me. He knew who Jesus was, so either he forgot, or Jesus was doing things that was placing some doubt in his mind as to whether Jesus is actually the one or not.

Let's clarify what the one actually means. Matthew gives us that answer in vs.2 where he identifies Jesus as the what? The Messiah. So the people of Israel were waiting for the Messiah and John knew in his baptism that he was the one who was going to bring salvation to the people of Israel, that was his name after all, Jesus means God saves. But the Messiah, as John understood it, was very different from who Jesus was. The Messiah according to John and pretty much all of 1st century Judaism was one that would bring about a political liberation from the tyranny of Rome. See why this Scripture is so appropriate for today. The people of Israel were so convinced that they knew what the Messiah was going to look like and that Messiah would bring about a political and military liberation that would set the people of Israel free and conquer completely the Roman Empire.

Jesus, what is going on, you are in the middle of your ministry and I don't see any military strategy taking place, you aren't stirring up the crowds to revolt against Rome, you aren't setting up your military plans in place. I know Scripture Jesus, and you aren't doing what we are told the Messiah is going to do. But John, and the rest of the people of Israel were not focusing on the Messiah that Isaiah tells us about. Isaiah tells anyone who would listen in

chapter 6 that because of the disobedience of his people God he is told when he is sent out as a prophet to: make the minds of the people dull, stop their ears, shut their eyes.

John was so distracted by what was happening around him, which wasn't an easy life as he finds himself in jail, that he missed the promise that the Messiah will come not as a religious hero, but rather as a dying savior. Jesus comes with acts of healing as opposed to military exploits. We make the same mistake, we think that our heroes of today are somehow those who speak the loudest or seem the strongest, but maybe, just maybe, God sends a bruised reed to lead. The more we focus on what the world wants, the less we are able to see what God has in store for us.

So Jesus answers John's question that he poses to him through his disciples. What is going on Jesus, are you the one or do we need to keep waiting. The implication that I hear is John saying, Jesus, you were supposed to be the one but we are burning time here and so you better get to work. Jesus answers John without actually answering him. How do you ever know who a person is and what they believe and what is important to them and what they value? They can tell you over and over again who they are but if their actions tell a different story, what are you going to believe?

If a person says they love Jesus, how do we actually know? It is said that a person can say things, someone can say a lie over and over again until everyone around him believes it, and maybe they begin to believe it also. They can say: I love Jesus, but they treat women with disdain and contempt. They can say I love Jesus but how they spend their money reflects a completely different story. Someone can say I love Jesus but when you interact with them you just feel your life getting sucked out of you and you leave them more depressed than what you were before.

Jesus answers the disciples, John wants to know who I am? Go and tell him what you are seeing and hearing and that should be his answer. Go and tell him what you are experiencing when you interact with me, go and tell him how I am living my life, that should be all he needs to know. But Jesus doesn't leave it up to the disciples of John to interpret what to tell John, he goes on and says tell him this. That was pretty smart. They could have told John anything, yeah, the religious leaders really don't like him and he seems kinda weak and puny. No, he tells them tell John this. He fills in the blank for them.

Read vs.5, all of these things are what Isaiah says will happen when the Messiah comes. All of these things the people were not looking for and probably completely missed because they

were so distracted by the political news of the day. How do we respond when people ask what is happening at your church, is it some place that maybe we could find a home? Are we able to say something similar to what Jesus says about himself? Can we say, well, what do you see and hear, and not what you find in the papers that tends to be the negative, but can you tell people of the doubling of the food bags that we gave out this year to over 500 to families in need? Between this year and last year we brought in 121 new families into our food bank ministry.

What do you see and hear here at First Presbyterian? As a result of our Prayer and Scripture and Action initiative we were able to have about 80 people participate and we decorated 145 bags for meals on wheels, wrote 20 letters to the incarcerated. You know what's happening now? They are writing back, maybe half a dozen letters we have received and some of you are fostering relationships with the incarcerated. Our focus on Scripture has allowed many of you to read through the Bible for the first time, and you have told me about it. I am sitting with some of you and praying in my office because of this initiative, some of you for the first time in your life.

Session voted fund the Community Impact Committee which provides financial assistance to those in need. What are you seeing and hearing about this church? You need to be telling people about this church and how it is trying hard to act according to the will of God and fulfill the Isaiah Scriptures. So what is going on, a lot, and it is all focused on the kingdom of God and not what is happening in the political realm of today.

What would people say about you as an individual? What is going on in your life? Well, what do you see? Do we just say the words that we think people want to hear, or are we living our lives as a reflection of what God wants us to do and to be, as Isaiah commands? What would your kids say about your love for Jesus, what do they see and hear? I can tell you that when I was growing up I didn't really like my parents and it was really easy for me to identify the negative and be cynical. But as I got older I can tell you that the witness that they were for the kingdom is probably the most powerful witness I have ever experienced. They didn't talk much about their faith, but they devoted their life to reaching out to those who were on the margins that Isaiah says has to be our focus and our emphasis.

In Matthew 11 we read that after Jesus had trained his disciples he went about proclaiming the Gospel. What we do here in church is train for what we will do out there. While the rest of the world is focusing on the confusion and asking what is going on, we can let them see and hear the kingdom by what we are doing. Jesus tells John the Baptist to believe he is the

Messiah because of what he sees and hears, not just because he wants to believe something really badly. The acts of Jesus, whose focus is on the poor and the outcast, is living proof of who he is. It should be the same for us as a church and as individuals. Amen.