

There's more to a book than its cover!

Text: Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

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We're reaching a time of year when the Scripture readings are familiar to church-goers and carol-lovers. This can be helpful because the words become a part of us and the stories begin to rest in our souls, rather than just in our minds. But, it can also be a hindrance because sometimes we hear only the familiar and forget to listen to the edges of what we know for fresh perspectives. Please, would you pray with me!

God, you are the author of the greatest stories of all. Open our ears this season to hear anew old and sometimes familiar words. Stir the questions in us, let your spirit fan the flames of our curiosity, trouble our certain understanding so that we wrestle with and discover new insights this day and this season. Amen.

This morning's Gospel text from Matthew presents the familiar image of John the Baptist. We know him as the cousin of Jesus who baptizes Jesus in the waters of the Jordan River. But, before that happens, we hear about him as this voice crying out in the wilderness, drawing people to repentance, wearing rough camel hair clothing, and eating locusts and wild honey.

A familiar picture of this wild and unusual character - we might think "oh, yes, it's John the Baptist," and move on to the next piece of the story. It's pretty obvious that John is something of an extremist. A prophetic character on the periphery, he is not following in his father, Zechariah's, footsteps and becoming a temple priest, and he has left the comforts of home behind. All familiar. But let's not move on right yet. What of his message? There's a piece of it that we might prefer to skip over!

3:7 But when he [John] saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

3:8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 3:9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

3:10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

3:11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

3:12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Does this honestly sound like the Jesus you know from Scripture? Is this the meek and mild Jesus of childhood prayers? The Jesus who says love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, turn the other cheek? It doesn't sound like it.

In chapter 11, Matthew's Gospel tells us that:

í when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities. When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "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: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

John's expectations of an exacting judge, a chaff-burning Messiah, were not being met. And he was like "Hello? Is this it? Are you it? Come on!"

It's a little embarrassing, really. I mean, if you want to build a movement, I think you should at least have your ducks in a row ó deliver on the promises made.

But, here's the thing ó John and Jesus weren't part of the same movement. We're left with the understanding that while their messages weren't incompatible, they were clearly different. For one thing, they remained in two different schools, each having a group of disciples. John was an ascetic Jew who called other Jews to account and baptized them ó a ritual washing that accompanied repentance. He was interested in rejuvenating and refocusing Judaism. By the time Matthew's Gospel was recorded, it was understood that Jesus, on the other hand, was invested in a much broader message for a much broader audience.

So, why on earth would Matthew leave this evidence of mismatched expectations? Why didn't he either alter or contextualize John to suit the ministry he knew Jesus had that focused on healing and bringing good news rather than dominating and rebuking? Or, why didn't Matthew reinterpret Jesus so that he better resembled John's expectation of the violent eschatological judge?

I like to think that Matthew left this mismatch so that we too might learn that there's more to a book than its cover.

Sometimes, like John, we expect God to deliver something just as we expect it, just as we predicted. But just as Jesus didn't fulfill John's expectations, God's answers and transformative power won't always come in the form that we imagine.

This principle rang very true for me this past week as I had cause to reflect on the life of Nelson Mandela, known lovingly by his clan name, Madiba. Growing up, I didn't know his name even though he was from my region of the country and was an influential leader in the anti-apartheid struggle. Along with many other names, it was illegal to publicize his name or the cause. The strict controls over all media and print publications meant that his name, when mentioned, dripped with connotations of sedition, violence and terror. In fact, the United States had him listed on the terrorism watch list until 2008 ó eighteen years after his release from prison.

This week, I've reflected on my own journey with Madiba, from unknowing to a deep and abiding love for him as the father of my nation, the father of the ideology and morality of peace and forgiveness. I remember the day he was released from prison. It was a Sunday, it was also my birthday. It was all over the news and I knew it was important but I didn't really get it or not fully.

I knew it was important because it was such a self-aware time or like the whole nation, the whole world, was caught in that moment right as you exhale a long-held breath and fill your lungs to break into song or a run of nervous speculation. It was a cacophony or as apartheid loosened its grip, this was the moment that marked the flood-waters of change breaking forth. People celebrated. They questioned what would happen next. Some said there would be genocide or civil war. Some left the country in fear.

In Nelson Mandela, many people expected the freedom-fighter. He had been the commander of the armed struggle, a man labeled a terrorist at home and abroad. But there's more to a book than its cover, and when he walked out of prison in 1990, many or on both sides of the political divide or were surprised to find a peacemaker. Someone who forgave and sought to reconcile peoples shaping a unified rainbow nation.

Nelson Mandela wasn't a man of the cloth, he wasn't even a church-goer, to speak of. He was a man of conviction and great courage, one who would be used for greater purposes than he might even have imagined.

And don't get me wrong, I'm not comparing Nelson Mandela to Jesus or placing them on a par. What I am saying is that the labels we place on people, the expectations we create, often aren't the whole story or what's really behind the cover.

Here's the point - God will use who God will use, as surely as God will be who God will be. The great or Amö is so invested in this world, breaking-in in ways we don't always expect.

John was expecting a warrior-Messiah as Savior, one who would liberate his people by a show of strength and force, rather than an itinerant preacher who gathered a band of disciples and preached about the last being first. And or Matthew's whole point is that Christology must be reinterpreted in light of Jesus' advent as the forgiving, accepting, non-retaliatory suffering-servant king whose strength is precisely in his meekness.¹

Remember the reading from Isaiah, an entirely new way of being, a world of peace where violence and wickedness have ceased and there is release, comfort, and safety for the downtrodden and vulnerable.

This is what we understand Jesus came to do, but it's a different picture from the vengeful image of a winnowing fork and the unquenchable fire of John's words. So, when Jesus' actions don't match John's expectation, he asks: "are you the one?"

As we watch and wait and prepare in Advent, we have to ask ourselves: for whom are we watching? What is our expectation of the one for whom we wait and prepare? Will we look beyond the label and read beyond the cover? Will we recognize the Messiah as Christ comes again?

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