

Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My daughter Rebecca says it's called the "chicken exit." As my family and I prepared to go to Disney World last week for a vacation, Rebecca read in a guide book that some rides there have a "chicken exit." In other words, you've decided to try a Disney World attraction, say, the Twilight Zone Tower of Terror at MGM Studios, a 13-story high replica of a hotel. This is a ride in which you strap yourself into a seat in an elevator, ascend to the thirteenth floor, only to have the elevator plunge several stories, sending you into free fall. Then you stop, ascend, and plunge again. The drops are randomly sequenced. You never know if you'll drop 2 or 6 times. OK. That's the ride. But Disney always has the story-before-the-ride. First, you enter the creepy hotel façade. Next, you listen to Rod Serling tell the tale of the unfortunate elevator occupants who plunged to their untimely death on Halloween night in 1939 during a terrific thunderstorm. Then you walk through the bowels of the hotel to the maintenance elevator which will be . . . your ride . . . and that is the moment, says Rebecca, when you can inform an elevator operator you wish to go no further. If you're having second thoughts, they will show you to the "chicken exit."

Of course, Rebecca didn't **tell** me about the chicken exit prior to our going on this ride. Don't you just hate finding out things after the fact? We did the ride—twice. I apologized to my family for screaming in their ears the entire time. And while I did not know about that so-called "chicken exit," there was that precise moment, as the elevator ascended, when I truly thought to myself, "**What am I doing here?**"

Oh, I was having second thoughts, all right. Maybe I shouldn't have agreed to go on this ride. Maybe I should have volunteered to hold the backpacks and water bottles at ground level. After all, we'd gone to Disney World for fun, relaxation. I was going to celebrate my birthday later in the week in the Magic Kingdom. But now I wondered if I'd live to see that birthday, as Rod Serling's voice declared, "You've just entered the Twilight Zone," and the drops began.

There is nothing worse than that feeling in the pit of your stomach when you find yourself in a situation and wonder, "What am I doing here?" Think of the times **you** have had second thoughts, misgivings. Consider those moments when you have asked yourself, "Did I make the right choice? Am I doing the right thing? Was this the best path to take?" You mull over the scenario again and again in your mind, searching for something which will assure you the decision was right, the action appropriate, until you are as dizzy as I was on the Tea Cup ride in Fantasyland.

Life provides all kinds of circumstances where uncertainty will well up in us, where second-guessing our first inclinations will become matter of course. Now, sometimes in our misgivings we can back out before it's too late—find the "chicken exit," if you will. But many times we are well into the ride before we even recognize that we want to turn around and get off, change our course of action, alter our plans.

And if you have ever experienced that sinking feeling in a situation and wondered, "What am I doing here?", then you know exactly what John the Baptist was experiencing.

Most of our mental images of John the Baptist are ones of a wild and woolly character out in the desert, speaking his mind and prophesying the word of the Lord. No hesitation on his part, he tells the religious leaders just what he thinks of them and their religious hypocrisy. From last week's scripture we learn John calls those Pharisees and Sadducees snakes! Tells 'em they **better** run, because God himself, ax in hand, will cut down every tree that does not bear good fruit. He says this with such certainty and boldness, that the crowds come to him, confess their sin, and receive a baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming of this God.

The other familiar image of John the Baptist is the one who baptizes Jesus of Nazareth out in that wilderness. Again, John's certainty in this situation leads him to say boldly, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?" John, having seen Jesus face-to-face, is convinced Jesus is the One he's been

preaching about, the One for whom his people—the Jewish people—have been waiting, the Messiah. John is sure it is Jesus who will usher in God's kingdom, and John knows exactly what that ushering will look like. He prophesies that the One to come has his winnowing fork in hand, and he will thresh until all the worthless chaff is separated from the grain, and can be tossed into the fire. John sees God's judgment ahead, and God's establishment of a new order where the righteous will be vindicated and the wicked damned.

But **today's** Gospel lesson gives us another image of John the Baptist. It is a painful image to see, for the outspoken prophet who proclaimed with such certainty is now wracked with **uncertainty**. Imprisoned, no word on what is to be his own fate, he reflects on what he once proclaimed with confidence—the expected Messiah, this person Jesus. John begins to have second thoughts, misgivings. He mulls over the whole scenario in his mind: Maybe I baptized the wrong person. Maybe I shouldn't have opened my big mouth. Maybe I wouldn't be in prison now. And my cousin Jesus, who doesn't exactly look like the ax-at-the-root-of-the-tree and winnowing-fork type of guy, apparently won't be storming the prison with his revolutionaries any time soon to free me. What kind of new order is God planning? What kind of kingdom will Jesus usher in?

John sends through his followers the most poignant of questions to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John's not looking for the "chicken exit" here. He recognizes he's long since moved beyond any opportunity to turn back. But in his question to Jesus, you can see he just wants to know. He just wants some certainty regarding God's plan for creation. He just wants to be assured that his role as prophet hasn't been for naught. He just wants to know that, even if he faces execution, he has spoken the truth and fought the good fight of faith. What Jesus was about seemed inconsistent with what John had prophesied, so of course he had to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus did not answer **John's** question with a yes or no. Instead, he told John's followers to go back and inform John about what they saw and heard around them: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf now hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. That's exactly what was happening as Jesus walked among the people. Note Jesus didn't have to add, "As it is written by the prophet Isaiah . . ." because John the Baptist would already have recognized those words as Jewish scripture. It was a clear, unambiguous reference to our Old Testament lesson this morning—Isaiah's vision of God's plan to redeem his people. Through his words, Jesus replaced John's image of the ax and the winnowing fork with the image of broken people restored, of a desert blossoming under God's healing care. An angry God in wrathful judgment? That image was replaced with the Creator whose love for his creation was boundless.

So, you see, Jesus **did** answer John's question. Jesus **is** who John expected, but he does not act in the **way** John expected. There's Jesus, eating with sinners, offering forgiveness, calling people forth to new lives. He didn't exactly match up with John's original prophecy, but the end result was the same—God's promises would be fulfilled in him, God's kingdom would come.

In our most troubled moments, when we are wracked with uncertainty and second thoughts, when we wonder just what it is we are doing here, John's poignant question becomes ours. Jesus, are you the One? Are you here with me now—not just in some hazy future I can't even picture but are you here with me now? And can I trust you? Can I strap myself onto this ride in life I'm on, knowing I'm in for a few surprises, a few twists and turns, a few free falls, as well as some moments when I'll want to get off—can I strap myself onto this ride, knowing you will not leave me? Can I face the days ahead of me—today even—assured that your Holy Spirit is at work, molding and shaping me, picking me up when I fall, strengthening me to follow in your ways? Can I accept my earthly life's end, trusting that because you live, Jesus, the heavenly ride you promise me is more glorious than I can possibly imagine?

We come here, in this season of hope, asking as fervently as John, "Are you the One?", and we wait for his answer. Jesus doesn't answer our question with a yes or no. He answers by **giving** himself to us. He answers through his actions. He gives his answer through this community which enfolds us with his love. We experience it and share it. He gives his answer in scripture and sermon and song. We hear it and repeat it. He gives his answer in a bit of bread placed in our outstretched hands. We swallow it and journey on more confidently because of it.

Come, Lord Jesus, not only into our world, but into our hearts, so that when someone poignantly asks us, "Is he the One?" we won't have to answer with a yes. We'll be able to **show** them. **AMEN.**

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