

What did you come here to see? ([Matthew 11:2-11](#))

Jesus asks, “What did you come out to see?” By this time, John the Baptist has been imprisoned by Herod the governor (son of King Herod who ruled when Jesus was born) because John’s criticized Herod for taking his own brother’s wife. John’s outspokenness will, literally, cost him his head. Also, hearers would have understood that a reed was a symbol for the house of Herod. And so Jesus asks, “Were you expecting salvation to come from those who rule in the name of Rome? Did you expect the children of King Herod (who, by the way, tried to have me killed at my birth) to blow the trumpet and announce my arrival? Did you think the one who prepared the way for the Son of Man would be dressed in finery and dine in castles?”

Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, wanders in the wilderness for over a month. He faces down temptation, fasts, and was definitely *not* dressed in fine robes by the end of that time. John announced Jesus by saying, “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.” And so Jesus is reminding people: “signing up with me is not the easy road.”

What did *you* expect, when you made a decision to cast your lot as a follower of Jesus? Sometimes being on the Way feels safe and protected, but a lot of other times, doing the work of love is heartbreakingly hard. And, life itself, without vowing to try and practice love, forgiveness and healing, is quite hard enough.

Just this week, here in our little parish, three parishioners lost family members: Bill Jackobsen’s wife Brett died in surgery. Blondell Barnes’ mother died far away in Antigua. And Burt Kessler’s younger brother died suddenly of a heart attack. Many of us here knew and loved Albany resident Catherine Sutton, who died Monday, and whose funeral will be held here tomorrow. And of course the week continued to unroll the names of those lost in the Ghost Ship fire in Oakland. Heartbreak. And that’s just death, which is part of life.

But, because we ARE held in love, and we have chosen to journey with Jesus, my eyes were open to see these things here, too: friends gathered to help plan Catherine’s service and console her husband. Music filled our hall (more than once). Children, safe and dry, played and studied in that same hall, all week. Violin lessons were given. Singing was practiced. There were prayers and and times of listening with people who are hurting. The Eucharist was celebrated, and Morning Prayer and Benedictine spiritual practices were shared. Meals were shared. Work happened here toward building an East Bay chapter of a national Episcopal peace organization.

In other words, life on the journey with God is a wild mix of everything—beauty, pain, challenge, hope, almost there, not really there, when will we ever *get* there?, joyful expectation, caving-in to fear, strength in the face of fear. But here is our anchor. Here, in our worship, is our anchor: Jesus, the Christ. We come here because of the good news, the “gospel” that gets us from stuck to free, from empty to abundance.

John Howard Yoder speaks of rescuing the word “gospel” from all the layers we have put on it today. He encourages us to look past its modern meanings as a type of spiritual county music, or the property of certain Protestant sects. He invites us to look back to it’s original meaning: a message of good news. A secular term—news brought by a messenger of the government. Maybe a battle had been won, or taxes were being lowered. It was, as he puts it,

news that “impinges upon the fate of the community.” “Good news” is the report brought by a runner to a Greek city, that a distant battle has been won, preserving their freedom; or that a son has been born to the king, assuring a generation of

political stability. "Gospel" is good news having seriously to do with the people's welfare.<sup>1</sup>

It is news with a revolutionary power: freedom, safety, a vision for the future.

The news that Jesus sends back to John in prison is good news taken in a different and powerful direction: liberation for those who are not offended at the healing actions of Jesus. Saving news to those for whom no government messenger would ever have stopped.

The other side is, of course, that there are those who are offended by this kind of good news. Those who thought they could lord it over people they deemed outcasts are afraid. It is *exactly the opposite of good news* to the powers that be.

Advent is a space we can use to take stock of our own spiritual location. Are the words and work of Jesus good news to us? Or are they threatening to our comfort, our stasis? Those who are utterly comfortable have no need of a savior who comes to bind up wounds, to restore what has been broken.

Advent is a time for us to be spiritually honest. Are we willing to be as vulnerable as John the Baptist—preaching repentance and assuring forgiveness? To be as close to the margins as Mary, asked to bear the incredible challenge of being an unmarried pregnant woman at a time and place where there were grave consequences for such brazenness? To be as patient as Zachariah, father of John the Baptist, silenced by the angel for the nine months of Elizabeth's pregnancy and whose tongue is loosed only when there is good news to proclaim?

Advent is a beautiful time of preparation, of waiting and watching, but it is also a time that ought to shake us up at least a bit.

Fr. Alfred Delp, a Roman Catholic priest hanged in for opposing Hitler and, wrote an essay about Advent shortly before his death. In it he said,

The world today needs people who have been shaken by ultimate calamities and emerged from them with the knowledge and awareness that those who look to the Lord will still be preserved by him, even if they are hounded from the earth. (85)  
...[It is the gospel message itself that shakes]—so that in the end the world shall be shaken.<sup>2</sup>

This IS what we have come out to the wilderness to see. We *know* what it means to be shaken in this life. And, I hope, we know what it means to have the compassion and strength of God with us on the journey. If Advent does not shake us, then where is the space for wonder in our hearts? Where is the willingness to be healed, or indeed, to even notice or confess that we are wounded? Fr. Delp's image of the shaking power of the message of Advent echoes today's opening prayer. By God's grace, may we be shaken by Holy Love.

*Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> John Howard Yoder, "The Original Revolution", in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2004) pp. 120-126

<sup>2</sup> Fr. Alfred Delp, "The Shaking Power of Advent" in *Watch for the Light*, p. 83