

THE KINGDOM IS AT HAND. ARE YOU?

Did you ever have an encounter with someone who changed your life? I did. To be honest with you, I don't even know the guy's name. Looking back, it must have happened in the spring or summer of 1989. I was living in Atlanta at the time. I was recently graduated from college.

I was going downtown on the Marta train with a friend of mine. We were going to Underground Atlanta. On the way we met two people who were headed there, and we struck up a conversation with them.

We shopped for a while and then we went to a café there in Underground. While in the café, the man we had met began to tell his story. It seems that he was in Vietnam. He had joined the army because, like so many people, in Vietnam the judge gave him a choice between going to prison and joining the Army. While he was in the Army, he claimed to have been attached to a special political unit. He broke down into tears as he told me that he committed atrocities while he was there. He had been ordered to line up prisoners and shoot every third one. That's what he claimed; I don't know if it's true, but that's what he claimed. That was without regard to age, or sex. He had killed women and children too. Then he told me about how he had gone home and held his own child in his arms, and how he couldn't deal with the pain of that. Keep in mind that he told me all this before I even went to seminary. I wasn't a pastor yet, just somebody he had met on the train, and he was unburdening his soul to me.

He had never been able reconcile the irony of all that- of holding his own child and the atrocities he had committed. With tears in his eyes as we parted, he said to me, "I pray to God that you will forget me." I never have. The fact is that the image of that man haunts me to this day.

Every year at Christmas we announce the coming of Christ. We do so by reading this passage about John the Baptist. In this passage John is pictured as a little bit eccentric. He is a guy who leaves his family behind, and he goes to live as a hermit in the wilderness. Now we consider that a little eccentric today. In the Ancient World it was downright crazy.

The wilderness of Judea was a desolate place. Very little grows there. Nobody lived there except outlaws, bandits and zealots. John left behind his family, his friends, and his only means of economic support to go out and live in the desert.

He dressed himself in camel skins. This is a big deal. The camel was an unclean animal. Pious Jews are not supposed to touch it. Yet, John dresses in a camel hide. Not only that, but John ate honey and locusts. That's not unclean, but it's certainly disgusting. This man placed himself in a position where it would be impossible for him to observe the purity laws of the Torah.

I grew up in the town of Decatur, Alabama. Like all towns, Decatur had its share of crazy people. One man that sticks out in my mind was locally known as the guru. He was a homeless man. I think, maybe, he was a believer in Eastern mysticism. He did a number of crazy things. I remember sitting in class in my high school, and the front of my high school looked out on a city park just across the street. One day he showed up in the park, waving to the students who were looking at him out the window- including me. He began gesticulating and shouting wildly. We couldn't make out what he was saying, but I always had the feeling that he was trying to bless us.

My parents lived in a historic neighborhood adjacent to downtown Decatur. The post office was only a block away. One day I happened to walk past the post office, and I noticed a car parked in front. The back window was down. As I walked past, I noticed a pair of feet, bearing flip flops sticking out of the back window. I confess that I was overcome with curiosity. So, I walked over close to the car and looked in the back of the car, and there I saw the guru fast asleep in the backseat of the car. Now, I thought this was funny, not only because he was sleeping in the car with his feet sticking out the window, but because I was pretty sure that he didn't own a car.

Now in the scheme of things in first century Palestine, John would have been considered just as eccentric. But the funniest thing happened. People flocked to him. I can't imagine people flocking to the guru, although a few times he did draw a crowd of hecklers. People flocked to John.

Now, the obvious question is- why? Why would people flock to see John? I think the answer is surprising because it's so simple. I think the came to see John because they were looking for something for something they were missing in their lives. They came looking for meaning. John offered it.

I recently began reading a book by Maria Ressa. If you don't know that name, she is a Filipino journalist, who also happens to be an American citizen. She was born in the Philippines, moved to the United States, became a naturalized citizen, and has moved back to the Philippines. She has been doing in depth reporting on the corruption within the authoritarian Filipino government. Because of her reporting, she has been arrested, ridiculed, and threatened many times. She is facing multiple indictments that could bring a sentence of life imprisonment, all for telling the truth about the government of the Philippines. Note, that because she is an American citizen, she could choose to flee to safety in the United States. Instead, she has chosen to stay and fight for what is right.

The book I'm reading is entitled How to Stand Up to a Dictator. In it she says, "If you're lucky, you realize early on that each decision you make answers a question that all of us muddle through: how to build meaning in our lives. Meaning is not something you stumble across or

what someone gives you; you build it through every choice you make, the commitments you choose, the people you love, and the values you hold dear.”¹

John came asking people to make a choice. He said, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” That message appears to have been enough. The bible says people were coming from Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins and were baptized. John offered them a message that you can find meaning in repenting of your sins- turning towards God.

It wasn't just ordinary people. The bible says the Pharisees and Sadducees came as well. To understand this, we need to understand that these were the religious authorities of the day. These were the important people in the church- these were the pillars of the church, so to speak. It was assumed that when they spoke, you should listen, because they were closer to God than anyone else, and yet, they're coming to listen to a homeless man in the desert. These were people who should be treated with respect, but they're coming to listen to this man in the desert.

So, imagine the surprise of the crowd when John turned to these pillars of the church and said, “You brood of vipers., who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore, bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance.”

To me this is a critical passage because of its theological implications. You see, you can go into any church, anywhere, and hear that all that is necessary to achieve salvation is to believe- and that's true. If you choose to believe- or if you're a Calvinist, if the Holy Spirit inspires you to believe- you'll be saved. It's true. For some of us, that will be enough. We can just white knuckle our way through this life until I achieve salvation: until we join Christ in the afterlife.

But for me I that salvation, which we achieve simply by the grace of God, that salvation that we achieve through that belief, is where the story begins. I'm looking for more than just meaning that will come after I die. I want my life here on earth to mean something as well. I want my life to have meaning in the here and now.

I think Jesus calls us to just that: to look beyond the salvation that he freely gives by his grace, to a life of discipleship that brings meaning to our lives every single day. I'm looking for more than just to save my wretched hide as the hymn says. The grace that saved a wretch like me. I want that grace, but I want more than that. I'm looking to make a difference. I want my life to mean something. I want my life to stand for something, and I hope all of you do too.

I will tell you; I believe that a person who is only interested in salvation and in saving themselves is a person to be pitied, because there's so much more that Christ has to offer. In my opinion, that's the most important thing that Christ offers but there's more that Christ

¹Ressa, Maria, [How to Stand Up to a Dictator](#) , HarperCollins e-books, 2022.

offers. In my opinion, that's a life that has no meaning. It exists only to be saved. It's a life just checking a box.

That, I believe is what is behind this statement that John makes to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They expect to be part of the in crowd simply because of who they are. They're important people. They refer to themselves as the sons of Abraham. But John says, "Do not suppose you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you , that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; ; every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Now, I suppose that might bring to mind images of the fires of hell, but I don't think that's where John is going here. I think it's reference to burning cut brush. I think the underlying message is that if a person wants to find meaning in their lives, they need to bear good fruit. If all that matters to you is where you wind up in the end, then go ahead, believe in Jesus, and you'll get there eventually, I promise you.

I once heard it said that if you want to master a skill you have to spend 10,000 hours on that skill. If you want to be a concert pianist, you've got to practice for 10,000 hours before you can get there. If you want to be a college football player, you've got to practice for 10,000 hours before you become good enough to step on the field for a power 5 institution. Anything that you want to master requires 10,000 hours of practice to master. How many hours do you spend being a disciple? Is that something you really want to master? On the other hand, if you want a life filled with understanding and spiritual strength, you're going to have to do more. You're going to have to be a servant, because in service to your neighbor and in relationship to God, because it's in those things that we find meaning.

Just like that soldier that I met so long ago. He couldn't find meaning in his life, because he couldn't accept that God could forgive him for the sins he had committed. Those sins became a stumbling block that prevented him from understanding that God can forgive anything. So, here's a question. What stumbling block is preventing you from giving this life to Jesus- not just the next one, but this one. I know you believe, and I know you're saved, but that's about being with Jesus in the Kingdom to come. What's preventing from giving yourself to Jesus now?

The Kingdom of God is at hand. It's available to you every day. Every minute! Every second! You can get as close to God as you want, or be as far away as you want. The choice is yours. The Kingdom of God is at hand! Are you?