

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that every one of you has heard of Christopher Columbus. What you may not know, unless you are a history buff, is that Columbus made a total of four voyages to America. Columbus's initial voyage was a voyage of exploration. He was looking for a westerly route to China and India. You see in that day and age goods from China and India came from the East; they across the desert to the Middle East. From there, they were transported across the Mediterranean to Venice and other Italian cities and then on to the rest of Europe. Columbus knew the world was round. So, he reasoned that if he sailed west, he could cut out the middle men, and make a fortune.

Columbus returned from that initial voyage believing he had found that route. He believed he had found China and India. So, he returned three more times to the Americas to claim the riches he believed he had found. Columbus died in 1506. To his dying day, he believed that he had voyaged to the Far East. He wanted to believe he had found what he was looking for so much that he refused to admit that he was wrong.

Columbus had a real problem. India and China were supposed to have rare spices, fine silk, gold and silver, and rare gems. Columbus found no rare spices, no silk, no gems, and very little gold. Aside from the silver, which wasn't discovered until later, it appeared that Columbus's voyage was a bust. China and India were supposed to have large port cities, bustling with ships. Columbus found no cities though later explorers would. The trouble was the cities weren't seaports: they were inland. China and India were supposed to be technologically advanced; they were supposed to have writing, the wheel, oceangoing vessels and plows pulled by oxen. Instead, he found that the Native Americans were still working with stone tools, no draft animals, and canoes instead of ships.

Despite all this evidence to the contrary, Columbus died in 1506 still believing he had found the Far East. It would be several years later before Amerigo Vespucci, who gave his name "Amerigo" to the New World, would realize this was a New Continent, with riches of its own.

It's easy for me, looking back from more than 500 years in the future, to be critical of Columbus. I could say, "What an idiot." However, the problem with that is that in my experience Columbus's problem is a common problem across all of humanity, including me. I don't know about you, but I hate to admit that I'm wrong. How many of you hate to admit that you're wrong? If you do, you're in good company. I do too! It's easy to be so committed to looking for something that we find it, whether others see it or not. We want to believe so badly, that we will ignore any evidence to the contrary.

As I began looking at today's passage, I realized that this is the lesson this passage is trying to teach us. It's trying to teach us to be careful that we're not so desperately looking for something, that we insist we've found it.

When this passage opens, John the Baptist has been arrested by Herod. He is in prison and hears of the works of Jesus and sends word by the disciples. He sends his messengers with a question; "Are you the expected one or shall we look for someone else?" Jesus answers the question somewhat cryptically, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them." Instead of answering the question directly, Jesus essentially answers by asking, "What does it look like to you?"

So, the messengers from John depart, and as they are going away, Jesus turns to the crowd and speaks to them concerning John. "What did you go out into the desert to see?" he asks. "A reed shaken by the wind. But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, people who wear soft clothing sleep in King's palaces. What did you go to see? A Prophet? Yes, and one who is more than a prophet." The Jesus begins to tell them who John the Baptist is; he tells them John the Baptist is Elijah returning.

Now, looking at this passage, I believe it has four parts. The first part runs from verses 2-6. In part one, John is sitting in prison when he hears of Jesus deeds. I think the deeds of which he hears are the deeds he expects from the Messiah; this appears to be what he has been waiting to find; so, he sends his disciples to verify the identity of Jesus.

So, the disciples of John come and ask the question, "Are you the expected one or should we look for someone else?" Interestingly, Jesus doesn't answer the question. Essentially what he says just reinforces what John has already seen. Jesus says, "Go and tell him of my deeds." Tell him what you saw, because if you go and tell him you saw the same thing he has seen, it will confirm what he already suspects. So, just tell him of my deeds. Tell him what you saw.

Part 2 begins in vs. 7 when Jesus speaks to the crowd. The disciples have departed, and Jesus turns to the crowd and says to them. He says, "When you went out into the desert what were you looking for?" In other words, "I know what you found, but what were you looking for? Were you looking for a reed shaken by the wind? "

This question about a reed shaken by the wind is a euphemism that needs some explanation. What Jesus is really asking is, "Were you looking for a demon-filled man or a spirit-filled-man?" If it were in today's parlance, we might translate this as, "Were you looking for a crazy man?" The desert is the right place to find a crazy man but not the Messiah." Now, I would suggest that if people came looking for a crazy man, they were looking for the wrong thing. They should have been looking for the Messiah or, at least, someone who can lead them to the Messiah. However, if you do happen to be looking for a crazy person, the Judean wilderness is a good place to look. Apparently, there were a lot of them there in the ancient world.

Jesus continues, "Were you looking for a man in soft clothes? Only those who live in palaces wear soft clothes. " This is the opposite sentiment. This suggests that you might be

looking for the right thing. I say that because, the Messiah was expected to be a King. It seems reasonable to look for a King in a palace. However, the desert was the wrong place to look for a King.

Jesus continues, "But if by you're looking for a prophet, you found him. Not just a prophet, but more than that. This is the one about whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before you- who will prepare your way before you.'" In other words, John is a prophet who is preparing for the coming of the Messiah. If that's what you're looking for, you've found it.

I suppose the story could have ended there, but it doesn't. The next part begins in verse 11. "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he."

I suggest that just like those who were looking for a man in soft clothing or a spirit-filled man, we might be looking for the wrong thing too. Jesus goes on to say, "...from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence and violent men take it by force." Looking at what Jesus just said in the preceding verses, I wonder if Jesus is saying that people with preconceived notions of what to expect are bound and determined to get what they want. These are people who believe that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them. That it's theirs for the taking.

However, this guy in the desert- if you do happen to be willing to listen to him- he's Elijah, who scripture says will herald the coming of the Messiah.

Then begins the last part. Jesus tells us that the generation he is speaking to isn't listening. That's not what they want to hear. So, they try to discredit John and Jesus, but they can't. They try to say he has a demon, but Jesus says he is vindicated by his deeds.

Do you see the pattern here? All of us, everywhere, have a need for God. All of us go looking for God. You wouldn't be here, if you weren't looking for God. Most of us recognize our sinfulness and our need for grace, but I think very few of us truly internalize that and move to make a change.

The fact is most of us are looking for God to vindicate who we already are. We look for a God to fit our mold. And we ridicule those who say, "God isn't like that." We try to discredit them. But if they truly are of God, they're difficult to discredit, because their deeds vindicate them.

Then Jesus says even John, who was greater than all those who were born of women, wasn't as great as the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. The least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than any one of us, too. That's the attitude that we must adopt to have ears that hear.

Jesus is like that. Jesus wasn't born in a palace; he was born in a stable. He was not born in Rome (which was the center of the world at the time- the most powerful nation on Earth) but he was born in Judea (the backwater of the Roman Empire). He was not born the son of a King, but the son of a carpenter. Plus, he is hardest on the haves and easiest on the have nots.

So, let me ask you the same question Jesus asked that crowd that day. What are you looking for this Christmas? What are you looking for so badly that you will metaphorically "go to the Wilderness" to get it? Are you looking for a God who will vindicate who you already are? Do you say to yourself, this person must not be from God, because this God doesn't conform to the picture of God that I was looking for? I have done that, and I can tell you, that's a dead-end road. If it turns out you find a God who is different from what you expected, do you ridicule those who tell you that? I have done that as well. On the other hand, will you have the ears to hear the message of love, peace, hope, and joy that Christ brings to the world? Will you seek wisdom to follow God rather than expecting God to conform to your image?

This is a question we must all wrestle with in our walk of faith. The answer tells us more about your dedication to Christ than any other question I know. I know of no better time to wrestle with this question than now, during the advent season as we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ. The question is before us; when it comes to God, what are you really looking for?