

Hope in the King

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Dec. 12, 2021

Based on Matthew 11:2-11

Remember Jamal Khashoggi? He was the fearless Saudi Arabian journalist who was also a fierce critic of the Saudi Monarchy. Because he received death threats, he left Saudi Arabia and moved to the United States and took a job with *The Washington Post*, a newspaper with a stellar reputation for speaking truth to power.

He was based in Turkey and needed some legal papers necessary to get married. That was on October 2nd, 2018. Moments after entering the Saudi government building he went to in order to fetch his paperwork, he was brutally murdered.

He was not the only journalist so targeted in 2018. At least 27 and maybe as many as 45 other journalists were similarly targeted and killed that year. Many of those were in Mexico and Russia. Those who were murdered in Mexico often died at the hands of drug cartels. Those murdered in Russia were killed on orders of Vladimir Putin. The number of murdered journalists continues to rise world-wide.

John the Baptist was not a journalist, of course, but he was in some way the ancient world's version of a journalist. He was a prophet and as a prophet, his job was to expose the truth to a world where lying was an art form. Oftentimes he was talking to the head of the government about the government and its lies. His particular target was King Herod Antipas.

In the case in point in this morning's text, he was criticizing King Herod about his conjugal life which was a dangerous thing to do. British journalists take on the British royal family all the time over their personal affairs and it's no big deal.

The British royal family has no power at all, but it took a lot of courage and integrity for Jamal Khashoggi and John the Baptist to criticize the royal families they took on. It's what got John arrested and thrown into prison. Yes, and as with Jamal Khashoggi, it eventually got him killed.

Now, while John was sitting there in prison he was mightily confused. He was perplexed about Jesus because, as we saw in last week's scripture text, John had been preaching about the coming of a messiah. He preached about his confidence that the world was going to end any day; how God was angry with a white hot anger, and that God's ax was already targeting the root of the tree of humanity and God was going to chop it down.

God, he said, was going to separate the grain (good people) from the chaff (bad people). God was going to gather the grain into his storehouse and throw the harvest's chaff into a massive threshing fire.

And then John met Jesus ... and Jesus asked to be baptized, which confused John. But he still figured this must be the messiah. Then, when John is put in prison he hears from his own disciples about Jesus's preaching, and Jesus's preaching sounds nothing like John's. John is flummoxed.

Jesus's tone is just not sounding at all like John's. Jesus is having dinner parties with tax collectors. He is forgiving adulterers. What kind of messiah is this? So John sends a message through his own disciples to Jesus, asking if he is the messiah that John and his followers have been looking for, or should they all be looking for someone else?

Well, Jesus hears them out and sends John back this message. He says, "Tell John what you see and hear from me. The blind are receiving their sight, the lame are walking, the dead are raised, the poor are having the good news preached to them, and blessed is anyone who is not offended by me."

Now that is an odd answer. I mean, being a healer is no proof of being a messiah. Both Elijah and Elisha, two prophets in the Old Testament, were said to have accomplished healings, but neither was the messiah. Jesus's reply also echoes what the prophet Isaiah predicts in a message from God that includes the promise of healing and also good news for the hopeless, but it doesn't mention a messiah in those instances either. What are we to make of this?

Well, there's a story that may help us. It's about an old Amish man from Indiana who was approached by a rather clueless young man one day; a tourist.

You know, tourists flock to northern Indiana to gawk at the Amish and their 19th century carriages and quaint dress.

This young tourist asked the Amish gentleman, wearing his large straw hat and overalls, if he was a Christian. As I said, the young man was pretty clueless.

Well, the Amish gentleman didn't say, "Of course I'm a Christian." No; humble and taking nothing for granted, he pointed down the road to a nearby porch and said, "If you want to know if I'm a Christian you will have to ask my neighbor."

His point? Being a Christian is more than claiming to be one, and it is also more than affirming a series of doctrinal statements. Giving lip service to Christianity means nothing at all.

Christianity has a lot more to do with what we *do* than what we say, because what we do is a better reflection than what we say when it comes to the state of our heart as it relates to God.

What am I getting at here? Well, in a similar way, Jesus could have *claimed* to be the messiah. Many would have taken that as enough. But Jesus knew what the Amish farmer knew; that being a messiah is way more than a thing to be claimed.

I mean, anyone can claim to be the messiah. People do it every day. They preach on street corners or post things on social media to that effect. Words are cheap.

The only real evidence of who the messiah might be requires that we look at what they are doing and see if they are really embodying the healing and genuinely redemptive energy of God.

Today there is a healthy discussion going on about something called "wokeness." Many people on the political left claim to be "woke." For many it is a badge or righteousness. Maybe instead of claiming it, people should borrow from the Amish gentleman's humility and say, "If you want to know if I am "woke" ask my neighbor. Or maybe one can say simply, "I do my best to keep watch over my tendency to lapse into racist thinking." Some claim wokeness and use it as a license to call other people racist and that just seems to me to be twisted.

I mean, look, countering racism is **not** a “one-and-done” thing. It is a constant battle and the front-line of that war is in the middle of our own hearts.

So ... Jesus is saying to John and his disciples, “You decide if I am the messiah. Look at me. Look at what I’m busy doing. Look at the wholeness that people I touch are embodying. Look at the hope the hopeless are receiving from my words. Ask yourselves, ‘Isn’t this the kind of messiah the world really needs?’ Because, you know, the world has had enough of anger and judgment and what good has it ever done?”

And then Jesus says, “If you aren’t embarrassed by such a meek one as me, maybe you will want to sign on to be a loving change agent.” He is saying, “Join me, won’t you, in changing the world one hopeless heart at a time.”

There’s an old story about a man who went to a wise man and asked, “Which is the true religion? There are so many, which is the one that comes from God?”

Well, the wise man said the following to the man who was seeking:

Let me tell you a story. There once was a man who had a magic ring made of gold. Now, whoever wore it would become kind, generous and full of love. He couldn’t help it.

On his death bed each of his three sons came to him separately to pay their last respects and each one asked his father if he couldn’t be the one to inherit the magic ring. The man took this into consideration and when he was alone he sent a message summoning a friend to his bedside who was a jeweler.

The jeweler came and the wise man showed the jeweler the magic ring and asked him to make two exact copies of it. The jeweler embraced the task and accomplished it beautifully.

He delivered the two rings and the original, and the man who owned the magic gold ring could not tell the original from the other two. In fact, the jeweler confessed that he himself could not tell the difference, he had done such a remarkable job duplicating it.

The man gave each son one of those rings and all three thought each had the original ring; that is, until they met on the street randomly and each saw that the other two were wearing rings that were identical to his. Well. The man died and each of the sons was perplexed by this, and bothered by it, as well. They all wondered who had the magic ring that made the wearer kind and generous, and full of love, so they decided to take the case to a judge.

Well the judge said that as a man of law and not mineral, he couldn't establish which ring was the original, so he called in several jewelers. But none of them said they could establish which was the original either; the jeweler had done such a magnificent job.

And then the judge said, "You know there is one simple way to find out which is the real one. Each of you, just continue wearing your ring. In time it will become clear by your behavior (by your kindness, your generosity, your love) who it is who has the original magic ring.

The wise man who tells the story then says to the man who wants to know what the true religion is, *"The same thing is true of those who are looking for the "true" religion. It will become clear when you look at what the followers of that faith are doing."*

Now, it is the same with John the Baptist. Jesus, after saying what he says of John the Baptist, tells people that John is a true prophet. John is even more than a true prophet, says Jesus, based on John's integrity and courage and unique mission, to prepare the world for the coming of the messiah.

Then Jesus makes a curious comment about John. He says, "Truly I tell you, no one born of women is the equal of John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John."

Now what in the world is he saying here? Does it mean that John the Baptist doesn't make the cut of those who will go to heaven? Let me unpack it for you. In the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus uses the term "the least," or "the least of these," he is referring to the followers of Jesus.

In fact, it's very possible that in Matthew's own church, the followers of Jesus referred to themselves as "the least" or "the least of these." Instead of being boastful about being Christian, members of Matthew's church were unerringly humble about being Christians.

So, taking this term, "the least," to mean followers of Jesus, hear this verse again: "Truly I tell you that of those born of women, no one is greater than John the Baptist. Yet the least of these among the followers of Jesus are greater than he."

Jesus is saying that his followers are doing something even greater than John the Baptist did because they follow him; they follow his teachings. John announced the coming of Jesus, but he did not understand Jesus, nor did he follow him. In fact, he misunderstood him and his mission completely.

Those who follow Jesus are taking another step to bring in the reign of God that goes beyond what John was called to do. John's message, while full of courage, was full of anger and judgment. Jesus's followers must instead be full of love and forgiveness.

So, when people ask, "Is Jesus the messiah?" Jesus would say, "Look at my followers. See what they're doing if you want an answer to your question.

My followers can be identified **not** by what they say about themselves, but whether they are working to bring healing to the blind and lame, whether they are preaching good news to the poor and feeding the hungry with good things. Note the tone of their words and it will tell you the state of their hearts."

There was a very controversial doctrine that was bandied about during the Protestant Reformation. I'm sure you've heard of the doctrine of predestination. It was first propounded by St. Augustine in the fourth century based upon a verse in one of Paul's letters. Then it was propounded by Martin Luther, and after that, John Calvin put his own characteristic pragmatic spin on it.

When asked by his own anxious followers how a Christian is to know if he has been destined to live eternally in heaven or not, Calvin said, "Look at what you are doing.

If you are following the dictates of Jesus; if you are living an upright life; if you are caring for the poor, and feeding the hungry and visiting the sick and those in prison, you have no worries at all. You can see by your own behavior that God predestined you for heaven.” That kind of positivity was what old John Calvin was after. He saw that so many Christians in his day were so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good.

Again, being part of Christ’s kingdom has nothing to do with what we attest to, or how we identify ourselves. Anyone can *say* she is a Christian. The proof is in what we do – whether we truly follow the humble, empathetic heart of Jesus.

In her book, “Beyond Belief,” the fine Biblical interpreter, Elaine Pagels details the most important story I know about the beginnings of Christianity – how it gained traction when so many other 1st century spin-offs of Jewish religion did not. What got Christianity up to speed, if you will, was its reputation for exuding a radical kind of love.

Pagels also details how that love gradually ceased to be the gravitational center of our faith and was replaced instead by a hierarchical church that put something else above radical love – a system of doctrines. She details how Christianity went from a religion based on enacting the love of Jesus to becoming a religion based instead on affirming creedal statements in order to get into heaven.

I’m going to give her the last word here. She writes, “I am a historian of religion, and so I wondered when and how becoming a Christian became virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs,”

As I said, Pagels argues that, from the beginning, what attracted people to Christianity and to the church was the remarkable caring love Christians exuded. Of them, she writes ...

Those in need could find immediate, practical help almost anywhere in the empire where great cities, then, as now, were crowded with people [struggling to survive]. Inhabitants of the vast shantytowns that surrounded those cities tried to survive by begging, stealing, and prostitution . . .

Members of the Christian family contributed money to a fund to support orphans abandoned on the streets and garbage dumps. Christians brought food, medicine, and companionship to prisoners forced to work in mines, banished to prison islands, or held in jail.

“Such generosity,” Pagels says, “attracted crowds of newcomers, despite the risks.”

She quotes sociologist Rodney Stark, who observes that when the plague struck, “the only response was to run away, even from members of your own family. But Christians shocked their pagan neighbors by staying to care for the sick and dying.”

“Why did they do it?” Pagels asks. “Jews and Christians believed that God, who created humankind, actually loved the human race and evoked love in return. . . . What God requires is that human beings love one another and offer help—especially to the neediest.”

Well, that focus got lost along the way. Sadly, most churches put adherence to credal statements above everything else. It’s up to the rest of us to take the original love based faith of Jesus back. By what we do, and who we love.

Amen

Response: So, if someone were to accuse you of being a Christian, what evidence would there be to convict you? I’m speaking to those of you who would self-identify as such and also those of you who would not.

Again, being identified as a Christian has nothing to do with your attestation as one or not. What might make people think you were at all like Jesus?

Think of his forgiving character.
Think of his caring work.

If you can say, yes, I might be identified as such a one ... would the people who would say that about you be people close to you ... in your immediate family? In your extended family? Your close friends? Or acquaintances?