

*Disappointed in Jesus?*

Robert P. Hoch

First & Franklin Presbyterian Church  
Baltimore MD 21217

December 15, 2019

Matthew 11:2-11

<sup>2</sup>When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup>and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup>the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>6</sup>And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

<sup>7</sup>As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup>What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup>What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup>This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way before you.’

<sup>11</sup>Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

I.

John had heard about what Jesus was doing. And he was growing concerned. He was concerned because he had a vision for a God of fiery judgement, a God of sudden and quick success. And, looking back on the Jesus of Matthew 8-10, we see a person who is not at all fiery, not at all like a flash of lightning. Instead, we see a helper. We see Jesus healing and restoring a person with a skin disease; he actually heals a Roman military officer’s servant, which must have seemed like aiding and abetting the enemy to John, who is now wasting away in a Roman cell, a prisoner who probably wouldn’t lose a lot of love for a Roman military officer; Jesus heals a woman whose suffering probably didn’t rise to the level of John’s messianic expectations.

So, while he is in prison, his former conviction relative to Jesus begins to ebb. Doubts assail him and he asks, “Should we expect a *different kind* of messiah?”

If you’re a careful student of scripture, you might have noted that I did not follow the NRSV in its translation of verse 2b. Matthew uses the noun, *heteros* rather than a more common Greek word translated as “another.” In the Greek, *heteros* can be translated as either “another” — as in someone else is coming not far behind you (hence the NRSV); or, it can be translated as ‘one different in kind’ and not merely another of the same kind.”

In other words, John asks not whether we should expect another, but instead, “Should we wait for a different kind of Messiah?” (Eugene Boring, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), n. 266.

Believe it or not, there were messiahs, lots of them in Jesus’ day. There have always been messiahs. You might know a few people with a messiah complex. You may be your own personal messiah. So maybe it’s *another messiah* that we should look for. Or perhaps, John is thinking that this isn’t the *kind of messiah* he was looking for. Maybe he’s not disputing Jesus’ messiahship so much as he is questioning the kind of Messiah Jesus seems to be.

He has turned out to be a messiah of compassionate love rather than conquering power; a Messiah who makes his way slowly, rather than flashing like lightning, or riding on the wings of the wind. He labors with complicated people. And seems to enjoy their company. He’s not in a hurry to get home.

## II.

But maybe we are. John certainly was — John reminds me of a puma that I once saw in a cage in the Amazon. It paced back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, as if at any moment, the bars that kept it might vanish. Maybe we feel like we’re in prison but we’re revolutionaries in prison. Or maybe, you’re a person who wants to make a difference, but can’t seem to get around the gigantic problem. . . we’ve got an urgent sense of what needs to happen in the country, in our church, in our professional lives. We’ve got high expectations for our children, who have to reach the maximum of their potential. Why? Because we know the cost of college, the competition, the ferociously cutthroat reality of the economy. We’re also in a kind of prison. I’d like to turn the country around; make the church grow; overcome thorny budgetary problems. If only I had arms long enough, a voice big enough, a will powerful enough to command.

If you feel a little disappointed in Jesus today, you might find a friend in John. Tom Long says that John represents all who are disappointed in Jesus because he fails to meet their expectations. “Most of us are, on occasion, impatient with the ways of God in the world; we wish that God were more vigorous in punishing evil, swifter in answering prayer, clearer in renewing creation” (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 126). We’re pacing the cages that keep us . . . and maybe we’re not just pacing; maybe we begin to question the Jesus that got us here.

So far, Jesus hasn’t delivered us from the rise neo-fascist powers in the west; so far, Jesus has not delivered us from corporate greed; so far Jesus has not delivered us from the different prisons that seem to define us, racial categories, class identities, crass and indifferent attitudes to the creation . . . so long, in the prisons of our own making.

Should we be looking for a different kind of messiah? One who delivers on schedule?

You begin to wonder what it all means, if it doesn’t mean what you expected it to mean. Maybe we’re at war with our prison, and our prison isn’t so much physical, as mental, an idea of what freedom looks like, according to our ideas and expectations. We can only believe that God exists if we’re free of our captivity, which means deliverance on our terms rather than God’s terms.

We look around here, and say, “How’d I end up in this city jail? Maybe I should be looking for a different kind of messiah.”

### III.

If you’ve ever felt disappointment in Jesus, you probably didn’t say it too loudly. But my guess is that if you’ve been in church for this long, you may have felt that nagging sense that maybe Jesus is alright, but we were expecting a different kind of messiah, a different kind of salvation.

Maybe that’s a sign that you’re paying attention, not unlike John who, while in the prison of his disappointed expectations, doesn’t quite give up on Jesus. He’s still sending messages, asking questions; his body may be in prison, but his soul thirsts and hungers for God. He’s not sure what he believes but he hungers.

So, if you’re one of those who believes or doesn’t believe or isn’t sure, the text today isn’t about what you believe, or don’t believe, or what you’re still debating in your frontal cortex. It’s about whether you’re hungry for the bread that Jesus offers.

Simone Weil, the French mystic from the first part of the twentieth century, writes that belief isn’t as important as we might imagine. She says that people who say bread exists, or will exist in the future, are liars. Bread, she says, only exists to the extent that you hunger for it. Bread exists because we hunger.

John hungers in prison . . . and God in Christ answers his hunger with a different kind of bread. Jesus gives him a bread unlike every other kind of bread that we would ever know because in truth he feels a different kind of hunger. The bread that Jesus gives is a bread that satisfies the deepest hunger and lets us know that those hungers, those pantings, those pacing hours were really the mirror reflection of the true bread which only God can give.

I think that’s good news. Jesus tells John’s disciples to tell him what they see. People are being made whole, John! And not just any people, not the people you would have thought, but people who aren’t successful. Mediocre people, not particularly talented people. Women who suffered from chronic pain are being healed, John; a Roman officer, who was just an emotional wreck after his life-long partner took ill — Jesus healed him, too. Jesus’ heart was moved for a Roman officer who was heartbroken, because his lover was dying — everybody knew they were lovers — Jesus brought him back again.

And the way they held one another . . . there was no shame in their love, because shame had no power.

A different kind of bread . . . for a deeper hunger.

Maybe we started to doubt John’s status with Jesus. But Jesus again reminds us that John isn’t just any old prophet. He’s the greatest of the prophets, Jesus announces. But you know something, even the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. Even the least. . . .

## IV.

This is not just a statement about hierarchy, who's who in the pecking order, but rather what is ultimate in God's rule.

Martha Manning, a clinical psychologist, wrote that she used to hate Mister Rogers:

“You could fit an entire episode on an index card  
because nothing happened.

Fred Rogers opened the door  
and immediately changed his clothes.

While he talked, he took his somewhat ratty sweater from his fake closet  
and slowly put it on.

For some reason, he had to change from his regular shoes into sneakers,  
though there was no significant physical activity on the show. . . .

‘Fred,’ I would yell silently as I watched his show with my daughter, ‘You need to speed things up.’

‘I’m losing my mind here.’

‘I’ve got stuff to do.’

‘Talk faster.

Don’t leave those long pauses

where people are supposed to answer your questions  
or reflect on your ideas.’

‘Put some flash into the ‘Neighborhood.’

‘It’s boring.’

‘And for God’s sake,

stop looking into the camera like you’re peering into the eyes of your viewers.

You’ve got my kid hypnotized.’

She says that the closing song, “It’s such good feeling” meant that her liberation was near, her freedom was nigh. Her daughter made her sing with her, as they watched the credits, and then, at the very end, her daughter would let out this big, contented, happy sigh, a sigh that announced she was a complete human being.

And mom didn’t understand it. That is, not until she suffered a debilitating season of depression. Pretty soon, watching Mister Rogers on TV with her daughter was about the only thing she could do. And the messages started getting to her, maybe because, in God’s mysterious way, they were for her. He left spaces of quiet to think. When life was hard, he said so. He didn’t have any magic, even the puppets were obvious. But the message, the message was so subtle, almost like a whisper . . .

In one episode, he was with a little boy confined to a wheelchair. And somehow, sitting beside him, in human relation, Mister Rogers and the little boy, separated by age and condition, were free to laugh together, loved maybe for precisely who they were together, and would continue to be

together, no matter how much separated them in age, or condition. If Mister Rogers was an advocate, his advocacy came from a place of attention to things, to people, spaces, and silences . . . attention to all things, maybe especially our hungers, as holy ground.

“Mister Rogers gave comfort,” writes Manning. “He didn’t sell it. He didn’t knock us over the head with it. It wasn’t cool or sexy or easy” (accessed on 2 January 2019 at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-used-to-hate-mister-rogers-then-i-discovered-how-much-i-needed-him/2019/11/22/902a6728-0d5d-11ea-bd9d-c628fd48b3a0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-used-to-hate-mister-rogers-then-i-discovered-how-much-i-needed-him/2019/11/22/902a6728-0d5d-11ea-bd9d-c628fd48b3a0_story.html)).

Personally, I only remember a time in my life when I would have been ashamed to say that I found Mister Rogers comforting. Somehow that came up in a conversation while I was at home, with my mom. But she told me, to my genuine surprise, that she remembers a time when I loved Mister Rogers, sang his songs, waited for his familiar, soft spoken way.

Once upon a time, there was a child in each of us, free in awe, free in laughter, free in wonder. Jesus said that if we are to enter into the kingdom of God, we must enter it as children. Maybe it’s not just another kingdom, but another kind of kingdom.

May it be so for all of us. Amen.