

ARE YOU THE ONE?

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Matthew 11:2-11

May 31, 1970 was a Sunday. At 3:23 p.m. that day an earthquake jolted the Pacific Ocean off the coast of South America. The earthquake lasted 45 seconds and had a magnitude of 7.9. It was categorized as “severe.” The epicenter of this earthquake was just 22 miles off the coast of Peru. The damage created by the earthquake was extensive. It is estimated that 70,000 people were killed. This earthquake is known officially as the Ancash earthquake, but more commonly it is called The Great Peruvian Earthquake.

70,000 deaths in one cataclysmic event is a tragedy beyond imagining. What makes it worse is that possibly 20,000 of those deaths could have been prevented. Eight years before the earthquake, in 1962, two scientists tried to warn the people of Peru of the potential for this disaster. But no one listened.

David Bernay and Charles Sawyer were two American geologists who were climbing Mount Huascarán, the highest peak in Peru. While climbing, they recognized that the glacier on the north side of the mountain was unstable. They concluded that if this glacier should come loose, it would destroy the city of Yungay which lay below. The pair reported their findings to a national newspaper which printed the warning. However, the Peruvian government objected to their findings and threatened to put the two Americans in jail if they did not retract their statement. They prudently issued a retraction and quickly left the country.

Eight years later, the Ancash earthquake dislodged the glacier which created a debris avalanche of ice, water, and rock which barreled nine miles down the valley into the city of Yungay just as had been predicted. 20,000 people died. Only about 400 survived. These people survived because they happened to be at the two highest points in town. 92 were at the hilltop cemetery and 300 (mostly children) were at the stadium watching a circus. The Peruvian government has since forbidden any excavation of the buried city. It has been declared a National Cemetery. This loss of life could have been prevented if people had just listened to the ones who foretold what would happen.

Last Sunday, we looked at a person who also foretold of a world changing event. John the Baptist preached in the wilderness foretelling the coming of the Messiah. John called all people to confess their sins. He offered them a baptism for the repentance of their sins. The curious asked John if he were the Messiah that he predicted. And he would tell them no, that the one to come will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John asserted that he was not worthy to even carry the sandals of this mighty savior.

This savior is Jesus and he does arrive and requests John's baptism in the Jordan River. John reluctantly agrees. When Jesus emerges from the water, a voice from heaven announced, *This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*

John and Jesus go in different directions. Jesus heads north to Galilee to begin his ministry in that region. John continues preaching in the Judean wilderness. That is, however, until Herod has John arrested and thrown in prison. It would appear that John had been publicly critical of Herod's marriage. Herod married his own brother's wife which, for reasons I can't go into now, John declared to be against God's law. Royalty doesn't like to be criticized or embarrassed, so Herod created a pretext to put John in prison. It is here that our reading for today begins.

While John is in prison, he hears news of what Jesus had been doing in Galilee—the preaching and the deeds of power. So, John send some of his disciples to Jesus with a question. The question they bring is this: *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

At any time, this would be a pertinent question. But for John, the time is especially poignant because John has spent his life preaching of the coming of the Messiah and it appears it will cost him his life. We know that he will die in prison—executed at the whim of Herod's wife. He can see the writing on the prison wall, so he sends word to Jesus with that question, *Are you the one?* He wants to know if he's bet on the right horse. He wants to know that his life has not been in vain. He wants to know if Jesus is truly the messiah that his people have been searching for and waiting for. *Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?*

As I mentioned, this is a legitimate question, especially for John in his predicament. It is the same question that we pose when we find ourselves in distress. For most of us, our relationship with Christ is convenient. When asked if we believe, we say yes. But we usually make that claim halfheartedly. The truth is, when life is good, we don't need a savior. But when life gets rough, that is when we get serious. The job loss, the bankruptcy, the infidelity, the death, the cancer—when we are pushed to the edge is when we really start our search for a savior.

John sends the question to Jesus, *Are you the one?* but Jesus doesn't answer yes or no. Jesus responds to John's disciples asking them another question, *what do you see, what do you hear?* Jesus lists all the miracles and deeds of power he has performed. "If you need to know if I am truly the Messiah, then look at the evidence. What do you see happening now that hasn't happened before? *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.* The proof is in the pudding. Is the Messiah among us? Is Jesus the one? What do you see? What do you hear? That should tell you.

John had good reason to raise this question. There were others who alleged that they were the Messiah, others who had preached, others who made claims. All were empty. But Jesus does not need to make a claim, he just asks, *What do you see?*

As we look back, it is saddening that 50 years ago, the people responsible for the Peruvian city Yungay, refused to open their eyes at what could eventually save that city. No one knew the earthquake would strike as it did. But people—knowledgeable people—foretold of the dangers just as John the Baptist foretold of the great glory that would accompany the messiah.

In this season of Advent, we are to be preparing ourselves for the celebration of God's coming into our world in the person of Jesus, our Christ, our Messiah. And it is the time for us to acknowledge, yes God is indeed among us. And it is also the time to ask "is he the one?" Because we know the answer. The answer is yes. Yes, he is. And we know it because of the miracles—great and small—that we have witnessed in our own lives. We must only look at these things and identify them as the deeds of power of a messiah. Before he was here, we did not see these things. But he is here now and our world is changed forever. As Jesus says, what do you see? This time of Advent is the time for us to look around and say, "I see the Christ."

Amen.