

Last week, John the Baptist was in the wilderness. He was baptizing people in the River Jordan. He was preparing the way of the Lord. And he. Was. Certain. He was certain that the Kingdom of Heaven had come near. He was certain that the Messiah's appearance was imminent. He was certain that this One who was coming would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He was convicted. He was committed. He was sure.

And today we hear about him some time later. He never minced words and wasn't afraid to call out religious and political authorities as a "brood of vipers." His cries to repent, his accusations hurled at King Herod, have finally caught up to him. He has been arrested. He is now in prison. He has been hearing reports about Jesus...and now it appears that he is not as certain. He is not as confident. His circumstances have changed dramatically and he needs some reassurance. So, he sends a message through his followers and he asks Jesus a simple question: "Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Now Jesus could have answered this in any number of ways. He could have gotten defensive and attacked John's credentials or accused him of not being faithful. He could have ridiculed John for asking the question in the first place. He could have pulled off an amazing show of power right then and there to make it impossible to deny his divinity. He could have looked around at his followers and given them a LOOK, like, "Are you kidding me?" But he didn't do any of those things. He took the question seriously and answered it...thought not in a straightforward manner. Instead of saying "yes" or "no," Jesus responded with accounts of the things he had done.

Instead of "Yes, I am the one," Jesus said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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." (Matthew 11:4b-5)

Already in Matthew's Gospel, there are numerous reports of the things Jesus has done. Jesus healed a leper as he came down from the Sermon on the Mount. He healed a centurion's servant in Capernum *and* Peter's mother-in-law later that same day. When his disciples were threatened by a storm on the sea, he ordered the wind and water to calm. In the country of the Gerasenes, he cast out demons. A paralytic got up and walked. A girl rose from the dead. A blind man saw again.

Jesus has been busy doing the work of the Kingdom. So, his response to John's question, "Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?" is to point to his actions...and the results of those actions.

This is the answer Jesus gives because *this* is the way we can see and *know* God is at work. It is hard to see a feeling of peace someone might have, or a sense of hope, or a lightness, or joy, or comfort. But those feelings are often the results of actions, the results of someone speaking good news, or being present, or acting in love. We have all these opportunities to look at the world around us and see and *know* that God is there.

There is often talk this time of year about a “war on Christmas.”

Usually, this amounts to some individuals being upset because people say “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas,” or if a public school or government entity is asked not to display a nativity. There is often a great deal of angst about all this because some people feel like these moves are somehow diminishing the celebration of Christmas for themselves. There are questions about how we, as people of faith, as people for whom Christmas is a *religious* holiday, as well as a secular one, can make the “reason for the season” known. How can we make plain that our celebration is not just about a tree, or presents, or Santa Claus? How can we make it clear that this day is about God coming into our world in an unexpected way?

Perhaps our best strategy is following Jesus’ example: pointing to actions. Not getting angry if someone says, “Happy Holidays;” not crying foul because a Christmas display is secular instead of Christian. Not going out of our way to fight with people who celebrate Christmas differently than us or not at all...but by displaying our faith and our hope through our *actions*. If we truly believe that Christmas is about God coming into our midst and living among us, taking on our humanity and, then, dying on a cross, all out of abundant and radical love, then our response isn’t to shake our fist at others or write snarky or angry messages on Social Media...but to *act*.

Writer and speaker Steve Maraboli has a great quote that I think hits directly at this point. He states: “Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, forgive the guilty, welcome the unwanted, care for the ill, love your enemies, and do unto others as you would have done unto you.”ⁱ

It might sound too simple. It might sound like it’s not really doing anything at all and we are simply taking a back seat. But there is power in simple. There is power in loving deeds. There is power in caring for our neighbor. And there is proclamation of the Gospel at the heart of it all. We might not always be speaking the words, but your testimony will be as clear as day.

John the Baptist wasn’t sure Jesus was the real deal. Jesus lets John know who he is through the amazing things he does...through the love of God that Jesus embodied and shared with Jew and Gentile alike.

...and it’s the same for us. The only way for other people to *know* about the wonderful things that God does and the abundant grace that God provides is to *participate* in God’s work in the world. We get to be a part of a community that lives out the values of the kingdom: welcoming, loving, forgiving, challenging, comforting, encouraging, growing...and we get embody God’s presence in the world through what we say and do. We are invited into God’s action.

Our God is a God of action. In creation, God formed order out of chaos. God led the Israelites from slavery into freedom. God set up judges, sent prophets and called kings. God raised up leaders of the people. God came as the Holy Spirit to inspire the Church. And, most clearly, God acted and became human. The infinite became finite, an incredible action done out of immeasurable love.

And it doesn't stop with God's action in scripture. God continues to act today. God is active in our baptisms. We may physically pour the water, but it is God's word and God's *action* that seals us with a promise and joins us to Christ. God is active in the meal we share. Others physically bake the bread and make the wine, but, again, it is God's word and God's *action* that takes it from ordinary, everyday food and drink into the sustaining body and blood of our Savior.

God's action is what has convicted us to be Christians. It is what has led us to this place and helped faith blossom. It is what has brought everything into being. And it is what will keep us going. God's loving, welcoming, forgiving, comforting, gracious, peaceful, challenging, encouraging action that we encounter over and over again.

Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/476284-want-to-keep-christ-in-christmas-feed-the-hungry-clothe>.