

Understanding the Assignment

As we just heard, our text this morning begins with John the Baptist sending two of his disciples to Jesus. In chapter three Luke tells us that John is imprisoned by Herod for suggesting that Herod's marriage to his brother's wife was not exactly on the up and up. While Luke does not spell it out here, it seems that John is still in prison while Jesus' fame—or notoriety, depending on who you ask—is spreading. While the text does not spell out John's motives for sending his disciples to question Jesus, it does tell us that John is questioning what he has heard about this one. Yes, as a babe in utero, John leapt as Mary visited his mother, Elizabeth. In Luke's account, the two men have apparently not crossed paths since their moment by the Jordan when Jesus was baptized. John has spent his ministry proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. He has not seen Jesus in action. As he spends his day after day and night after night in his cell, it makes sense that he might begin to wonder if Jesus is the one he's been hoping for and pointing to.

As frustrating as I may find it, Jesus does not give John's disciples a straight answer. Nor does he give them a script, not a word-for-word one anyway. Instead, he gives them one assignment, one job: "Go and tell John what *you* have seen and heard."¹ These disciples are called to witness to John, to share in their own words what they have seen and heard.

A few months ago, a couple of our students asked me if I ever use AI to help write my sermons. I told them no. I also told them that writing sermons is one of my favorite parts of the

¹ Luke 7:22, NRSVue

job. They smiled and only rolled their eyes a little. It's true though. It is my job to wrestle out loud with ancient texts in the context of faith and then put what I have seen and heard into my own words. And I love my job. Hearing a colleague preach the summer after I graduated from Davidson was the moment the call to ministry rumbled loud enough for me to finally pay attention. I have no idea what he said, but as he spoke it dawned on me that digging into texts and working to make sense of them alongside real people, within the faith that had sustained me through some of my darkest moments would be the greatest privilege and even fun. And by the grace of God, I have yet to be proven wrong. I love my job, and it is not just *my* job.

As many of you know, I love talking about the foundational documents of our Presbyterian heritage, the words generations have used to describe who we understand ourselves to be and how we live out our identity as Christ's body in and for the world. One section carries the heading "The Great Ends of the Church," the six things we Presbyterians have discerned the church's purpose to be. These words spell out our assignment. The sixth Great End is "the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."² In other words, it is our job to show the world what the kingdom of God looks like. *Go and tell what **you** have seen and heard, Jesus says. Go and show what it means to be a part of the Body of Christ.*

In the middle of this morning's text, Jesus presses the crowd around him on what they were seeking when they followed John into the desert: "What did you go out into the

² PCUSA Book of Order, F-1.0304:

"The great ends of the Church are:

the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
the maintenance of divine worship;
the preservation of the truth;
the promotion of social righteousness; and
the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."

wilderness to look at?"³ In the span of three verses, Jesus asks the crowds three times what they were looking for. *What did you go out to see?* If they were looking for a spectacle, they were likely disappointed. The same would be true if they were looking for a royal figure dressed in regal robes. I don't know what the crowds were looking for when they followed John into the wilderness. Nor can I read the minds of the crowds growing around Jesus in today's text. I suspect at least a few want to see what all the hubbub is about. I am convinced that more than a few of them long to be a part of the kingdom that Jesus is ushering in.

A group of us have been reading through Dr. Jacqueline Bussie's book, *Love Without Limits* ahead of her being with us next Sunday. I am in awe of her way with words. I am even more in awe of her raw honesty about how she has wrestled and continues to wrestle with being faithful, joyful, and loving in this complicated world, a world which has broken her heart in more ways than many of us can begin to imagine. Dr. Bussie will be the first to tell you that hers is what she calls a "scruffy faith." At one point in her powerful chapter on grief she writes:

Church can and should be so much more than a place where we dress up, sing, talk pretty, and don a fake Barbie smile so that others will perceive us as faithful, rather than what we actually are—a struggling people with a scruffy faith. Church [she goes on to say] should be less like a palace and more like a dog park: a place where the truth bounds wildly about, off the leash at last.⁴

What did you go out to see? What do you come here to find? What kind of kingdom are you looking for? Jesus sends John's disciples back to tell him what they have witnessed, what *they*

³ Luke 7:24-26, NRSVue

⁴ Jacqueline Bussie, *Love Without Limits: Jesus' Radical Vision for Love with No Exceptions*, paperback edition, 2022, p. 157.

have experienced. And what they have seen is not a pristine palace or an A-list crowd. What they have witnessed more closely resembles the ER on a holiday weekend during flu season. What they have seen is people on the margins being given new life and the lonely and left out being told that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven includes them, too.

It's been almost five years since other pastors and I pivoted overnight to preach to cameras and iPad screens. The onset of the pandemic was scary and difficult in so many ways. Many faithful ones grew accustomed over time to worshipping online in their pjs with their coffee in hand and their dogs in their laps. A few months in, a member of my previous congregation shared a cartoon of a woman shuffling into a sanctuary in her robe and slippers carrying a coffee cup. The caption joked that she had forgotten how to dress for church. I told her I would just be thrilled to see her in church even in her shabbiest robe. I love getting dressed up. I love shoes far more than I should. I love seersucker suit season. That said, I look out into this congregation each Sunday, and I think you look "mahvelous," as Billy Crystal might say, whether you are all spruced up or barely dragging yourself in the door. I do not come out to church to see you at your shiny best. I come to see *you*, to be church with *you*. I come to see you with your worries, your joys, your fears, your hopes, your doubts, your grief. I come to see you, to worship with you, to weep with you, to sing with you, to pray with you, and to be sent out with you to love the world as best we can, even when that world exasperates us and infuriates us and breaks our hearts, maybe especially when the world does all those things. I see the worry behind your weary eyes as you struggle with the state of the world. I see you check in with one another, even as you take note of whose pew is empty again. I see you strain awkwardly across pews to introduce yourselves to visitors. I see you sigh and close your eyes as

the voluntary plays. I see you catch your breath when Jacquie plays and the choir sings. I see you smile and maybe even tear up when little feet come rumbling down the aisle. This is what I come out to see. I do not come to ooh and ahhh at pretty people in regal robes. I come to catch a glimpse of the Jesus who touched the untouchable and welcomed everyone, paying close attention to those no one else cared to notice. I come to be reminded what the scruffy, exquisitely beautiful kingdom of heaven looks like in real time so that I can be one small part of showing that kind of kingdom in and to the worried world.

We'll do another very Presbyterian thing after the close of worship when we hold our annual congregational meeting. We will hear about our budget, and you will vote on paying Casey and me for another year (thank you for that, by the way). You will also receive a copy of our annual report for 2024. It has numbers and words and perhaps best of all it has photos, lots of photos. Annual meetings are not terribly exciting on the surface. They are however one more piece of how we do our faithful best to glorify God and love our neighbors through this place in this moment. The work of the church is a scruffy thing. There is no script for this, not one that is crisply edited or perfected anyway. We the church are not slick or polished. It is rarely glamorous or efficient to tend to the needs of the least of these. It can be challenging to serve alongside other humans. The church is of course made up of people, all of whom happen to be beloved children of God. God's children have different stories and starkly differing views of the world, and God's children are guaranteed to disappoint one another on occasion. And it may feel a bit wasteful to pour our precious time, our limited resources, and our weary hearts into sharing and showing the love of God with a world that may not know how dearly it needs that love. That is our job. And it just so happens that in that work and in that witness is where we

find ourselves following in the footsteps of Jesus. He, too, poured himself into loving and healing and saving a world that did not deserve him, a world that largely rebuffed him, a world that was deeply unsettled—scandalized even—by his fiercely inclusive ways of grace and mercy and love and peace and justice. The empire and the religious elite tried to get rid of him once and for all and failed spectacularly. The world did not and does not deserve him. We who have been claimed by him do not deserve him either. And yet, Jesus is the One we have been looking for, he is the One the world needs, and by the astonishing grace of God, he still insists on seeking us out and refuses to give up on any of it or any of us.

May God grant us the humility to understand our assignment, scruffy as we may be. May God grant us the courage to do our job, to go and tell and show what we have seen and heard about Jesus. And when we do our job, when we go and tell what we have seen and heard, when we share and show Jesus' fiercely inclusive ways of grace and mercy and love and peace and justice, God's embattled and beloved world just may catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven in and through us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.