

## Message: "What Have We Done to Jesus?"

### Scripture Lesson: 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.

Last Sunday, I saw something - unbelievable. It was at the Holiday Pops concert, the annual concert that, for many Missoulians, is an essential part of what is known to locals as the Christmas quadrilateral - what, you ask, is the Christmas Quadrilateral? The Christmas Quadrilateral refers to the events that herald in the Christmas season in our fair city -- Holiday Pops concert, Jubellation handbell concert, John Floridis Family Promise Fundraiser concert, and Christmas Eve Candlelight Service.....by the way, three of those events happen right here!

In any event, I was attending one element of the quadrilateral last Sunday - the Holiday Pops concert held at Dennison Theater on the University of Montana campus. That's when I saw something - unbelievable. Astounding. Irrational. Well, it is obvious that words fail me to describe what I saw. Not wishing to keep you in suspense, but also aware that what I'm about to describe is something of a shock which defies explanation, so I wanted you to be prepared - for what I saw was a young man about 14 or 15 years old, sitting in front of me - wearing Bluetooth earbuds! You know, those things that stick out of the ear that remind you of earrings that are a little too big or are somehow worn incorrectly? I actually can't help but think of a sitcom I used to watch called "My Favorite Martian," where the man from mars had little antennae sticking out from behind his ears or maybe from the back of his head.....in any event, I was shocked to see someone at one of the premier holiday festivities that was all about a live presentation of professionally-derived melody and message that would delight the ear and warm the heart - listening to something else, essentially blocking out the beauty that was happening around him. I'm not sure what he was listening to, but I cannot imagine it was something better (or perhaps more important?) than what was going on around him. It was the equivalent of someone choosing a hot dog

when filet mignon is on the menu; it's like someone reading a magazine in the middle of a wedding ceremony; or, most horrifying of all - it's like someone texting during the sermon (I know! Isn't that a horrible thought?). Now I know none of you would ever do that! But it is worth imagining the unimaginable - listening to something mediocre when true glory is all around you.

I could not help wondering about that young man - I wanted to ask him, What do you hear? I must admit, it is possible that he was listening to an amazing rendition of Handel's Messiah, but I doubt it. It is possible that he was taking in an important lecture on a very deep topic, but my guess is no. He might have been listening to a football game, but the timing seemed off. But I realized what mattered was not so much what he was listening to, but what he was missing. And, at least to my ears, he missed a moment of amazingly beautiful music.

This brings up precisely what is at issue in our scripture lesson today - the difference between what we hear, and what is being broadcast. They can be very different things, for what we hear - or to be more precise, what we translate from our auditory sense into our comprehension and mental processes - what we hear depends largely upon the internal dynamics behind our particular worldview. What we receive, or fail to receive, is largely dependent upon how we see the world, as something that is there to serve our lives, or something that is there for us to serve or to take our place in. In other words, there is a great difference in a worldview which is shaped by the world alone, or by something beyond the world itself.

John the Baptist was in jail; he was at the mercy of Herod, who was a king of little mercy. As he awaited whatever the Herodian impulses came up with, he heard news of Jesus from various sources - he was given hearsay and gossip about this One whom he baptized into a mission to radically transform the world with winnowing fork and cleansing fire; the evildoers would be smited, the heavens would burst open and the earth would be torn asunder. But what he was hearing was news of healings and forgiveness, of blessings associated with the meek and the lowly, of a compassionate God and turning of the other cheek. There was no fire here, no rapturous devastation, no punitive measures meted out in vengeance and wrath - only love, and what love would make of us and have us do and be as God's beloved. So John the Baptist sent out his disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" It's easy to miss, but this is a powerful example of the doubts of John regarding who Jesus was - for he was hearing something different than what he had expected; it was like he was

hearing something contrary to what he wanted to hear, what he expected to hear, and was trying to understand something of God which was new.

It brings up one of the essential truths of faith that is key to us embracing what is true about God, about reality, about our existence, and it is this: What we choose to hear may be very different from what we need to hear - or what's really being said.

Likewise, what we choose to see is often very different from what we need to see - or what's really going on.

The last six or so years have provided us with astonishingly clear and poignant examples of how this tendency of ours gets us into trouble. I'll not rehearse all the dynamics and decisions of late which speak of accepting lies as truth, disbelieving science as if it was a choice, lifting up opinion as equal to fact, denying certain groups their rights - the Big lie, bills aimed at harming LGBTQ individuals, flying immigrants to Martha's Vineyard, Russia's spin on their unjustified war on Ukraine, still insisting it's not about guns, denying climate change while forests burn and glaciers disappear - so much of our world is run on what we want to believe is true, what we want to hear, what we want to see, that we miss the obvious truths that are all around us - how often is it that we work hard to make things fit the delusion we favor, rather than acknowledge an unpopular or inconvenient truth?

Take Jesus, for instance. There are many Christians in our country that see Jesus as someone on their side, someone who agrees with them in almost every respect. Jesus agrees with their life choices; Jesus agrees with their political affiliations; Jesus agrees with them on the various issues they take sides on. Jesus is anti-abortion, pro-gun, anti-climate care, pro-economy, pro-Griz, anti-Cats (perhaps that goes too far?).....

Do you hear the problem with this? It is not that they agree with Jesus, but that Jesus agrees with them! How incredibly backwards, but how incredibly common, that we start with who we want Jesus to be rather than who Jesus really was and is.

We are easily misled; we easily mislead ourselves; and we do so when we choose what we hear, rather than listen honestly to what's being revealed. What's revealed is what Jesus tells us about himself, his actual living amongst us - he tells the disciples of John to "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."

God is to be found with the meek, the humble, the suffering, the downcast, the mourning, the poor, the hungry, the sick, the oppressed, the vulnerable, the hurting. If we avoid such as these, we avoid God. This is what we realize when we honestly look to Jesus and the priority he placed upon his life - a life of service, not being served; a life of love without condition and forgiveness for the asking; a life speaking truth to power in all its forms; a life embodying God's will for the world, and for each one of us.

What do you see, when you look toward Jesus? One who is on your side, who agrees with your life as it is, who supports your causes or affiliations or opinions? Or one who invites you to be on His side, to live life according to an authority and a love greater than your own? One will give us the life we want; the other will give us the life God wants for us, which is better than anything we want. There is no comparison.