

Sermon ✝ December 11, 2022

Matthew 11:2-11

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My undergraduate degree is a B.A. in Speech and Theater. I also took the teaching block so that I could get a teaching certificate just in case this *church thing* didn't work out.

I student taught at Case High School in Racine. One of the plays I directed was Samuel Becket's classic, *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett presents us with a strange and confusing mood which we can feel but cannot describe with any precision. It is a play without a developing plot.

The two principal characters are Didi and Gogo—two tramps whose lives are intertwined. Didi is the intellectual, and like most intellectuals, he has many worries about which he likes to speculate and chatter. He is not a religious man, but he seems to have within him the debris of a faith he has lost. He seems to have some hope of redemption.

Gogo, his highly emotional partner, lives in fear of unidentified persons who beat him up. He is very forgetful, and has terrifying nightmares. He cannot bear to be alone. His faith, if ever he had any, has completely disappeared. So has his hope.

These two tramps are in a dreary place, waiting for help of some kind from a local landlord whom they simply refer to as Godot. This Godot does not appear in the play, but toward the end of each of the two short acts a small boy comes to tell Didi and Gogo that Godot is coming. Gogo does not believe that Godot will come. But he keeps close to Didi, who lives in expectation that some day Godot will come.

*Waiting for Godot*, is the kind of drama that invites an intensely personal response. Many have said that Godot is actually God and that Beckett is presenting a choice.

We can wait expectantly and hopefully for Godot, that is, wait for some special insight or some awareness which will show us that, in our human predicament, there is meaning and purpose. Or we can choose to tell ourselves that Godot is not going to come, that there is no Godot, that in the final analysis our human existence is without meaning.

Beckett's work as a whole suggests that he opts for the second choice although he seems a reluctant non-believer, almost as if he were saying, "*Of course there is no Godot. but I do wish there were!*"

Many in our own day move toward Beckett's second choice, feeling that ultimate meaning will always elude them and that Godot, although he may send messengers to announce that he is coming, never comes.

Expectancy marks the Christian season of Advent but for many it is a kind of frustrated expectancy similar to the frustration of Didi and Gogo and not unlike the frustration experienced by John the Baptist.

*“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”* That’s the question that was put to Jesus by two followers of John the Baptist.

John had been somewhat blunt in his criticism of the marriage of the ruler Herod Antipas to his brother's wife, and it was because of his big mouth that he was imprisoned. In his prison cell, John worried about the world running mad with evil firmly in control of affairs.

He wondered about his friend and cousin from the town of Nazareth, who was daring in this mad and evil world to talk affirmatively about love, forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation to God.

John, haunted by doubt and despair, was in danger of losing his faith in God and his hope for all humankind. He wondered if Jesus was on the right track.

Some friends came to visit him in prison and he asked them to seek out Jesus and ask him, *“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”* And this they did for John. Both hope and doubt are found in such a question.

The Jews had long expected a Messiah, the Christ who was to come from God to restore their national glory and to be the agent of salvation for all. They were, so to speak, waiting for Godot, waiting for that which would bring final meaning and fulfillment to their lives.

And so half-believing and half-disbelieving, John sent his question to Jesus, *“Are you the one...?”*

I venture to say we are not much different from John. It is with great frustration that we await Jesus' coming. We do not notice the signs.

We fail to recognize Jesus even though opportunities to discover and re-discover him are all around us. It is possible to look right at the signs that guarantee something is so and still not be totally convinced.

*Pastor Don Brewer tells this story: My wife once made a wrong turn on an evening trip home. She was traveling west, when she intended to be going east. Fighting the setting sun in her eyes for a while, she suddenly realized that the sun set in the west, and she was supposed to be heading east. The sign that guaranteed her direction was right in front of her. Can anyone really distrust such a sure sign? Unbelievably, she did. Her conclusion was not that she was going the wrong way, but that this evening, for some reason totally unknown to her, the sun was setting east.*

It is vitally important that we watch and take heed of the signs . . . the signs that announce the presence of Jesus.

The Messiah for which we wait never seems to fulfill all of our expectations. It seems that no matter who finally comes to us, we are never quite satisfied.

Years ago, I came across a copy of some old minutes from a General Board meeting of rural Indiana church: *"Elder Smith recommends we hire Mr. Johnson as our student minister. He has a background in music and a history of outstanding youth work. Music and youth are two areas of church life where we need improvement."*

Eighteen months later there was another entry: *"Elder Jones made the motion that we fire Mr. Johnson, our student minister. The man spends too much time working with the kids in the church and it seems all we do is sing during the worship service. We need more preaching and someone to work with older people."*

In vss. 7 and 8 of today's lesson Jesus addresses some of this "no-win" criticism that had been leveled at both himself and John: *"What did you go out into the wilderness to behold?"*

They wanted an earthly king not a simple carpenter. So often it seems that folks want the church to supply simple answers for complex situations. Were that it were so easy.

We are a frustrated people because so often we forget to tap our main resource for survival. The way of Jesus is still available to us.

In the teaching of Jesus, the major clue to the meaning of life is in the force of love, not as mere sentiment or emotion but as the active, sometimes sacrificial, willing of the good of others. That kind of love requires self-forgetfulness.

Meaning in life does not come to those who cultivate and coddle the self . . . who spend all of their time and energy searching for "their identity." Meaning in life comes to those who move out from an ingrown, self-concern to loving, accepting, and respecting relationships with others.

Fulfilment comes to those who make sacrifices not those who make demands.

We do wait for Jesus . . . all of us. Let us not be frustrated in our expectation. Let us not be blind to a God who is active in our world even now. Let us not ignore the opportunities for service and ministry.

The Christian need not wait for Godot, hoping against hope that he will come.

The Christian already has the answer to the question, *"Are you the one who is to come?"*

Amen.