

THE STRAIGHT & EASY ROAD

Matthew 11:2-11 & Isaiah 35:5-10

12.14.25

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INTO THE WOODS

From the time I was a young teenager to well, after Jean and I were married, my family used to vacation every summer for a week in one of the wonderful Indiana State Parks. I loved those vacations so much and they imprinted themselves so firmly on my mind and memory that a few years ago, Jean and I talked Ben and Carrie and the boys into accompanying us on just such a vacation. (And it was still fun.) Every year we'd rent a semi-primitive cabin and cook our meals over an old gas stove or a campfire.

We'd go fishing in the lakes, swim in the ice-cold swimming pools, ride horseback riding on the riding trails, and play touch football with other families in the meadow near the cabin area. In the evenings, we'd attend the programs and square dances offered by the naturalist service in the big shelter house by the lodge and in the afternoons, we'd hike the miles of trails that crisscrossed through the hundreds of acres of forests. I can't remember ever having anything but a wonderful time on those vacations.

One of the things I liked best was the naturalist hikes. I would get up early in the morning, just after dawn, long before anyone in my family rolled out of bed, and make my way to a designated spot where other hikers would gather to be led through the woods by a naturalist, often on trails that I had hiked just a day or two earlier but this time I would see things I never imagined could be there.

Here a sassafras tree with mitten shaped leaves which, when rubbed between your palms, smelled like root beer and the roots of which could be boiled to make tea that would reduce inflammation and aid healing. There, a Christmas fern that looked like a small Christmas tree and whose leathery green leaves stayed green all winter. A salamander scampering from leaf to leaf. A crawdad shooting backwards through a pool in the creek. A shaggy bark hickory tree. A tulip tree, the state tree of Indiana. An oak, a maple, a beech, an elm. Poison Ivy – leaves of three, leave it be.

Our guide would sometimes quiet us so we could hear the song of a Robin or a Cardinal. And, once we heard a mockingbird and, when the naturalist whistled a few notes, the bird copied them back to him.

All of these I had walked past the day before and not seen. It took the naturalist to point them out to me, and after that, I could never not see them when I hiked the trails.

When I was in the 7th grade I didn't know anything about the night sky. I looked up and all I saw were white dots called stars. Then I had Mr. Gowin as my science teacher, and he taught us about the constellations. He taught us how to identify them, and he taught us the stories that went with them. There was Orion the Hunter facing Taurus the Bull and protecting the Pleiades, the Seven Sisters clustered together just over Taurus's shoulder; Ursa Major was the great bear that contained the big dipper, and Ursa Minor was the little bear with the little

dipper. Over in the north sky was the W constellation, Cassiopea the beautiful queen who was punished for her vanity and made to spend eternity in the night sky, half the year upside down.

Today, more than 60 years later, I can still find and identify those winter constellations. I showed them to my children and my grandchildren. All thanks to Mr. Gowin who first showed them to me.

Try to remember. Who was that person who showed you the thing that you did not see before, who opened your eyes to that which you would have otherwise missed? A parent? A grandparent? An aunt or an uncle, a neighbor or a teacher or a pastor?

In today's gospel lesson, John the Baptizer was like the naturalist and Mr. Gowin. He points us toward the Messiah whose coming we will miss if we aren't watching for it. And in this story, the gospel writer, Matthew, calls us to serve as the new incarnation of John, pointing out Jesus the Messiah to others who might miss him if they aren't paying attention.

GIVING DIRECTIONS

Yet, even as great a man as John the Baptizer experiences doubts.

In the story we heard read earlier, John is in prison, for having insulted Herod's wife. He knows that his chances of surviving are 50/50 at best and he hears through the grapevine that Jesus is doing all kinds of things – teachings and miracles – that were pretty close to what the prophets said the Messiah would be doing.

He has previously identified Jesus as the Messiah but now, he wants to be sure. He wants to know that he hasn't wasted his life pointing in the wrong direction, identifying the wrong guy. So, he sends his own disciples, his followers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one whose coming was foretold... or not?"

If you're anything like me, you've experienced the same thing John is experiencing. Someone stops and asks you directions and you, being a kind and helping person, gladly give them the directions they are asking for: "Oh, sure. You just follow this road about 3 miles to the light at Thompson Road and you turn right there on Thompson and take it until it dead ends at Shaw Road and you turn left on Shaw and go about a mile until you hit Craig Road, turn left and you're right there. You'll see the sign."

And they thank you and pull away and suddenly it occurs to you that... "I just gave him the wrong directions." And it's too late. You can't correct it.

John wants to make sure he hasn't done that. So, he sends his disciples out to ask Jesus, "Have I been giving people the right directions, have I been pointing out the right constellations, or not?"

Jesus doesn't give him a straight answer, a "Yes" or "No," because he knows no one was ever convinced of something just because someone said so. I mean, you could tell me you're

a great cook and I might say, “Oh, okay,” you know, just to be polite, but before I really believe you, I’m going to want to taste some of that cooking, right?

Or I could tell you, “Hey, I’m a really good writer,” and you might not argue with me, but neither are you going to believe me until you read something I’ve written or at least see the awards I’ve received for my writing. In the movie, “Hearts of the West,” young, aspiring writer Lewis Tater (played by Jeff Bridges) introduces himself as a writer to Howard, a crusty old stuntman (played by Andy Griffith). Howard looks him up and down and then says, “Son, if all it took to be something was to say that’s what you are, the world would be full of nothin’ but rich men and beautiful women. You ain’t really a thing until other people say that’s what you are.”

Jesus knows that so, instead of telling John that he’s the Messiah, he says, “Look at the evidence.” And then he gives him some examples of messianic activities that are all not just literal things but metaphorical ones as well: Those who couldn’t see now have their eyes opened – literally and figuratively. Those who couldn’t move can move. Those who were considered unclean are accepted; those who couldn’t hear or refused to hear, are hearing; those who were dead or acted as though they were, are living; those who were hopeless, have hope. And this is the big one, those who respond positively to the things I say and do find themselves blessed.

So, he tells, John, believe your eyes and your ears. And then he tells the crowd, “Believe John. He has been telling you the truth. He’s been giving you the right directions. He’s the real deal. No prophet, no Jew born of woman has ever been greater than him. Yet, in God’s Kingdom, even the least – the powerless, the disabled, the outcast, the reject -- is greater than John.

THE STRAIGHT AND EASY ROAD

Matthew, as he writes this story, is paraphrasing the prophet, Isaiah.

Most scholars, today, divide the book of Isaiah into two or three books. Today, I choose to follow the two-book theory. First Isaiah or Isaiah of Jerusalem (Chapters 1-33) was written in about 740 BCE to warn the people of Israel about the calamity that will befall them if they choose to put their trust in their wealth and military power.

Second Isaiah or Isaiah of Babylon (Chapters 34-66) was written roughly 200 years later, in about 586 BC in Babylon, to give hope and comfort to the Jews who were being held there against their will by King Nebuchadnezzar. The editors of the Old Testament mistakenly combined them into one book by because they were written by two guys with the same name: Isaiah.

Anyway, the passage we heard, today, is from chapter 35 or Second Isaiah, Isaiah of Babylon in which he describes that joyous day when God punishes the Babylonians and the Israelites are allowed to return to their homes. It will be, he says, like entering the Kingdom of Heaven and, again, he uses metaphor to make his point. He talks about animals but he is also talking about people.

First, blind, deaf, speechless, and physically disabled people will be healed – literally and metaphorically. The desert, the hopeless, dangerous, worthless place where nothing grew, will spring forth with new life – literally and metaphorically. And – this is my favorite part – the path that leads to this holy place, this holy life, this wonderful, true, authentic way of living will not be narrow and difficult to follow. It will be like a highway where only good people; righteous people are allowed to drive. [And this is my favorite part.]

It will be so easy to navigate that even idiots, complete morons won't get lost following it. (He says, "foolish people", but we know what he means, right?)

I love this because the prophet is saying that there is a place in God's kingdom even for idiots, for fools. These are not people who are uneducated or intellectually challenged. Of course, those people are accepted into the kingdom. But these people, the ones Isaiah is talking about, are the ones who choose to be ignorant, who delight in their not knowing, who hide behind it and make excuses and blame others for it. These are the ones who are so profoundly ignorant that they don't know that they don't know.

And even they are included in God's Kingdom. Let's face it, folks. The only way you don't get into that kingdom is that you just don't want to get in. You walk up to the gate, you peek over the top, and you just turn around and walk away.

GO TELL

But we are in. We have, by God's grace, been admitted into God's kingdom where life is authentic, where love reigns supreme, where the weak are made strong, the blind can see, the lame not only walk but dance, where everyone plays first string, and where the buffet is open 24 hours a day and there's no such thing as a calorie.

Now, all that's left is for us to be the John the Baptizers, the Mr. Gowins, and the State Park Naturalists who point out this amazing, wonderful, beautiful reality to all those who don't, for whatever reason, see it. Maybe they're too busy. Maybe they're too distracted. Maybe they never heard of it. I don't know. But I do know what our job is – to point it out to them.

And how do we do that? Well, I'm convinced that we don't do it, at least not effectively, by standing on a street corner with a megaphone screaming at people about how they're going to hell. And I don't think we do it by paying money to have billboards erected along the highway or three big crosses erected on hilltops in the countryside. We don't accomplish it by hanging the 10 Commandments on walls of buildings or by requiring people to pray at public events.

Our assignment is not to change people's behavior or make them believe the right things, to bully them into accepting Jesus Christ as their personal lord and savior, or to best them in a public debate or on social media. Our job is to point them toward Jesus and, while Jesus doesn't exactly tell us how to do that, he tells us what it looks like when it's been done.

The blind, see.

That is, we have provided services to those who are visually impaired. And, we have opened people's eyes to what Jesus is really like by acting that way ourselves – kindly, generously, gently, and mercifully.

The lame walk.

That is, we have eradicated diseases like polio and birth defects like spina bifida from the earth and we have removed the prejudice and hate, the fear and loathing that freeze people into that paralysis which freezes human advancement.

The deaf hear.

All of the genetic conditions, environmental influences, infections, and age-related changes that cause deafness are conquered through medical science, and all of the societal, cognitive, and psychological barriers that keep us from hearing each other are removed.

To the degree that the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the poor receive hope, and the rejected are accepted, to that degree, the savior has arrived in our – or any – community.

When we see, truly see Jesus, and when we show him to others through the way we live, all those things which lead to human separation and estrangement be they physical, mental, emotional, or psychological will be overcome and set aside. And we will be free to walk upon that straight and easy road that leads to life in the Kingdom of God and upon which even foolish people cannot lose their way.

Upon this Gaudette Sunday, this Sunday of Joy, let us pray that God grants us all a grace filled and easy trip upon that road.

AMEN