

**Questioning the Gift**  
**Advent & Christmas: "The Perfect Gift"**  
**Sermon on John 1:6-8, 19-28 (12/13 & 12/14/14)**  
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During this season of Advent, here at McCabe, the Scripture readings we are using are from what's called *The Revised Common Lectionary*, or, more simply put, "the lectionary."

The lectionary is a three-year cycle of readings from the Bible. For the most part, each week of the lectionary year has four assigned readings: a reading from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a Gospel reading, and a *non*-Gospel New Testament reading.

If a church were to use all four of these readings in worship over the course of the three-year lectionary cycle, the people of that church would hear a great majority of the Bible read in worship. It takes three years, but that's how it works. Some churches pretty strictly follow the lectionary – many Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopal churches, for example – while others either follow it sporadically or never at all...as is the case in many United Methodist churches.

With our worship planning team, we decided to follow the lectionary for the seasons of Advent and Christmas. It was from the Gospel readings in the lectionary's current cycle that we developed our overall theme – "The Perfect Gift" – *and* that we came up with each week's sub-theme.

Our worship planning team gathered in September to explore the Gospel readings for Advent and Christmas, and, when we looked at today's reading, we were so aware of how many questions were contained within it:

In verse 19, the Jewish leaders asked John the Baptist who he was – was he the Messiah? No, he said. In verse 21, they asked him if he was Elijah or if he was a great prophet? Again, no.

In verse 22, the religious leaders threw their respective hands in the air and asked John, "Well, who *are* you then???"

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, John replied, "I am only someone shouting in the desert, 'Get the road ready for the Lord!'" Despite this definitive answer, however, the questions weren't done yet...because, then, in verse 24, a different set of Jewish religious leaders approached John the Baptist and asked him, "Why are you baptizing people, if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the [great] Prophet?"

“I use water to baptize people,” John replied. “But here with you is someone you don't know. Even though I came first, I am not good enough to untie his sandals.”

John's answer that time probably led to a question the Gospel writer chose to leave unasked. And *that* question, of course, was, “So...just who *is* this other guy?” The people were still unsure who *John* was. And then he told them about some *other* person to watch for.

The writer doesn't bother to have anyone actually ask this question – “So, just who *is* this *other* guy?” – and the folks who came up with the lectionary didn't think it necessary to include any more of John chapter one than what we read today.

“I use water to baptize people,” John said. “But here with you is someone you don't know. Even though I came first, I am not good enough to untie his sandals.” And then this selection ends with the statement in verse 28 that “John said this as he was baptizing east of the Jordan River in Bethany.”

At the end of this set of verses, there are so many questions left hanging in the air...begging to be answered. Frankly, that's probably how the creators of the lectionary wanted it: questions asked, but left unanswered.

Incidentally, if those who developed the lectionary had gone just one verse further for this particular reading, we would have been given the answer to the biggest question of this passage – the unspoken question about just who exactly it was John was preparing for...

Today's reading ends with verse 28, with everyone wondering about this mysterious stranger – Who is he? What will he do? When will we see him? And then verse 29 says this, “The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is the one I told you about when I said, “Someone else will come.””

Right there in the very next verse – the verse after today's reading ends. The answer to everyone's questions. Who is the guy John has been preparing us for? It's Jesus. And what exactly is so important about him? Why should we care? Well...he's the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The Gospel writer, John, will spend the rest of his Gospel teaching us just what exactly it means that Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...but, if the creators of the lectionary had only gone one verse further for today's reading, we, too, wouldn't be left with all those questions hanging in the air.

But, I guess... 'tis the season for questioning, don't you think?

We wrap the gifts we give to others with fun wrapping paper and we might even tie them up with nice bows. The wrapped gifts under our Christmas trees are themselves questions to be answered:

How many of us, when looking at a wrapped gift, question what it is... we might pick it up and make some guesses based on its relative weight...those of us who don't care about breakables might even shake those wrapped gifts in an attempt to answer the question of just what exactly is inside.

Of course, these are the fun questions of the season and we know they won't hang in the air – or, lay unopened under the tree, as it were – forever. We know we'll get the answer to questions about our Christmas presents on or around December 25<sup>th</sup>.

But this is a season for all sorts of *other* questions, too:

“Finances are so tight...what if we can't get the kids even half of what they're hoping they'll get for Christmas?” or “My family is a mess right now...how am I going to survive the next few weeks?” or “I have no idea where I'm supposed to be in life...how do I talk about that with my family over the holidays?” or “This will be my first Christmas alone...am I going to be able to handle it?” or “The news is so awful these days...Jesus was born 2,000 years ago – why don't things ever seem to get better???”

People in this community, people in our families, and people here at McCabe are asking themselves these very questions right now. And, unfortunately, *these* are not questions that will also be answered when we open our gifts on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Some of these questions are going to hang in the air and there is no guarantee when – or even *if* – they'll be answered.

Out and about in our culture, this is supposed to be “the most wonderful time of the year” and we're all supposed to have a “holly, jolly” Christmas and to be thrilled to pieces about time with family and about life in general. But I have no doubt a good percentage of us in this place right now are experiencing this time to be less than wonderful or holly-jolly.

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Early on in my time as an associate pastor in Pierre, South Dakota, we started what's called a “Blue Christmas” worship service.

If you're unfamiliar, a Blue Christmas worship service is designed to give space for people to acknowledge pain, grief, loneliness, and sadness around this time of year. And, of course, people experience hardship in this season for all sorts of reasons.

Blue Christmas worship gives people a quiet place away from all the “holly-jolly”...a place to give God the pain and the burdens we are carrying, while also being reminded that Christmas is, in fact, *all about* our pain and our burdens – and how God came to earth in Jesus Christ to bring eternal healing and hope.

I knew churches around the country that offered Blue Christmas services included Christmas carols, but, the first year I planned Blue Christmas for the church I was serving, I thought to myself, “How am I going to find a handful of Christmas carols that communicate the sense of melancholy and hope that is needed for this particular worship service???”

I was nervous I wasn't going to be able to find anything...I was just sure all of our Christmas carols were *only* happy. And then I actually started looking at all the lyrics for the Christmas carols in our United Methodist Hymnal.

There is melancholy *everywhere* in our Christmas carols. My struggle very quickly became not “will I *find* any melancholy Christmas carols,” but “how in the world will I choose only a *few* out of the many...???”

Though we will not be having a Blue Christmas worship service here at McCabe this year, it is something we will plan to have next year during Advent...and every year from then on.

Too many people choose especially to stay away from church around this time of year simply because they can't handle all the happiness when they are feeling anything *but* happy. Blue Christmas invites people into the church specifically to enter God's presence in the midst of their sadness, in the midst of their questions.

But, really, this season of Advent – the four-week journey *toward* Christmas – is designed to be just such a time: a time of longing...a time of acknowledging that all is not right in our world, in our lives, and even in our own hearts and minds.

And it *has* to be that kind of time – because Jesus was born into this world that we all might be saved through him...that the weary world might find true joy in the midst of sorrow...that we might discover peace in the midst of chaos...and that we might find forgiveness from our mistakes and from the pain inflicted on us by others.

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*“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward them and said: ‘Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’”*

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Since our worship team made the decision to follow the lectionary Gospel readings this Advent season, perhaps it's unfair of me to have used my sermon to add that extra verse in today.

Perhaps, like the creators of the lectionary, I should have allowed all of those questions to simply hang in the air: Who are you, John? Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you the great prophet? And for whom are you preparing us? Who is *he*? What's he going to do? Why should we care?

At a time of year when so many good, faithful people struggle with their own questions and challenges, perhaps there is beauty in letting any such questions simply hang in the air for a while with no clear answer.

Yet, God always speaks messages of hope and good news... especially when we are questioning, when we are struggling.

We don't always *hear* that good news and hope is often hard to hold onto. That's why we need the extra verse. That's why we need to hear and remember just who exactly Jesus is and why exactly he came.

*"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward them and said: 'Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'"*

If you don't find answers, good news, or hope in those words today, may you find them eventually.

*Let us pray...*

*God of questions and answers, there are times when we are left hanging...times when we are unsure not only about the future, but when we are unsure about the present. As we draw ever closer to Christmas day, be with us on this Advent journey. Help us to sense your brightness and your warmth. When we feel far from you, stay ever close. And may we remember that your Son, Jesus, is truly the Perfect Gift...the One who takes away sin and sorrow and blesses a weary world with joy. Amen.*