

Transfiguration
Dallas, Texas

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 146:4-9

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

There is a scene in action movies that is so often repeated that it has become cliché. Somewhere towards the end of the movie, the good guys finally catch up with the bad guys, who are holed-up in some abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of town. They are about to implement the final element of their evil plan, and all the while, the good guys are just outside, hiding behind a stack of pallets.

Inevitably, someone asks, "What's the plan?" And the hero says something like, "Wait here while I go around back. And don't make a move until I give you the sign." Then someone has to ask the next question, "What will the sign be?" And the hero always answers, "Oh, you'll know." And a few movie moments later, there's a huge explosion and the hero drives through the side of building in a cement truck at which point everyone knows...that was the awaited sign, and they all go into action.¹

Cliché or not, these scenes always feel satisfying, don't they? We may not know what the sign will be exactly, but we know it's going to be awesome when it finally happens. And we know it will signal a thrilling ride to the end of the movie when the bad guys are defeated in a barrage of bullets, fists, and wisecracks.

If only real life was more like this.

For most of us, we move through our days hoping that we're on the right track, hoping that we're doing the right thing, and we've made the right choices. But it would sure be nice if we had *a sign*...you know, a nice, clear, obvious sign of God's direction...something unmistakable, to let us know we're on the right path...something that shows us that God is real and paying attention and up to something in this world.

We are not the only ones who feel this way. According to today's gospel, it turns out this is pretty much how John the Baptist felt near the end of his life. John had, of course, thought that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the one for whom he had been preparing the world by his fiery preaching and zealously holy life. But mere months after passing the torch to Jesus at the Jordan River, when he no doubt thought Jesus would begin wielding that axe he'd been warning everyone about, John found himself in Herod's prison. Which I have to imagine was not what he was expecting to happen after the Messiah showed up. And as he paced his prison cell, wondering what went wrong, a thought began to consume him.

What if he'd made a mistake?

What if Jesus wasn't actually the messiah, after all?

So, desperate for a sign, he sent a messenger to ask Jesus what must have been a painfully honest question: "Are you the one we've been waiting for or not?"

¹ Thanks to Daniel Matthew for the inspiration behind this illustration. http://day1.org/2386-whats_the_plan

How awesome would it have been if that was the moment Jesus decided to drive a cement truck right through the walls of Herod's prison and bust John loose! Except...he is the Prince of Peace, not Arnold Schwarzenegger, so instead, he simply reminds John's messenger what he's been up to:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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.”

John may not have watched a lot of action movies, but it seems he was expecting more out of the Messiah than this. He expected someone who would be impossible to miss, who would make a clean sweep of things and bring in the righteous judgment of God. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, John wanted a tidal wave of a Messiah, and what he got instead was “a steady drip of mercy from a man named Jesus, in whom plenty of people saw no Messiah at all.”²

I think I know how John felt, and I wonder if you do, too. Who hasn't looked around at the world and noticed how little it resembles all these beautiful visions from Isaiah we've been hearing this Advent – how both the real and metaphorical lions of the world are still happily eating lambs, not lying down with them, and how weapons just keep multiplying rather than becoming garden tools. Who hasn't wondered along with John if maybe we've put our money on the wrong horse. There are more days than I'd like to admit – and especially when the news cycle gets bleak and it seems like we're never going to get to the happy ending – when I'd give anything for one fireball from heaven, one tidal wave from God, one great big cement truck with a hero at the wheel ready to blow some things up and save the day.

And so, I can imagine how John felt. He expected something different. He expected pretty much what the disciples did, who kept waiting for Jesus to start smiting the Romans and anyone else who got in their way and set up shop in Jerusalem as king.

But expectations...can be dangerous.

They can easily make us resentful when things don't turn out the way we want, which is why Enneagram guru Suzanne Stabile refers to expectations as “resentments waiting to happen.”³

Nowhere is this more true than in regard to our expectations of God. We *expect* God to side with us, whether it's about societal things like politics and governance or personal things like our health and happiness. And when it starts to look like God isn't going to do what we expected, when it seems like God isn't doing what we think God is *supposed* to be doing, the floor beneath our faith starts to open up and we wonder whether we've been wasting our time bothering with God at all. Never mind that God never promised to always be on our side or always do what we think God should be doing, which means our expectations are bending us toward disappointment.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven* (Westminster John Knox, 2004), 12.

³ <https://lemuriablog.com/jhcl-interview-suzanne-stabile/>

That's the trouble with expectations. If we're not careful, they can keep us from recognizing the goodness of what *is* happening, because we're so focused on our disappointment in what *is not*.

John expected the tidal wave, and he was so focused on that expectation that it prevented him from recognizing divine power in all the slow drips of Jesus' mercy and compassion. John expected a cement truck through the wall, so he couldn't recognize the divine power of Jesus quietly opening doors for people trapped in sin and despair. John's expectations prevented him from recognizing the power of God in such humble activity, because it wasn't what he was looking for.

Friends, before you look around the world at its problems, some of which seem to be getting worse, not better, and decide to that maybe this Jesus-stuff is just a bunch of phooey, consider whether your expectations have been setting you up for disappointment. Our expectations shape our perception of reality, and our expectations can be misguided or mistaken. Jesus never claimed to be an action hero. It may work for Hollywood, but that was never God's plan for bringing peace and justice to the world. So, rather than expecting the tidal wave and being disappointed by the drip of mercy, perhaps it's time to reset our expectations and realize that those slow drips of mercy are how God is going to change the world.

Because in each of those acts – each hungry person fed, each lonely person loved, each poor person who finally receives plenty, each oppressed person who finally experiences justice – in each of those seemingly small acts is nothing less than the power of God. They may seem like drips, but they are drips from the throne of heaven, and they will one day fill the bucket of the world to its brim so that the reality of the Kingdom of God will spill over everyone and everything with its blessing and peace. Cement trucks and action heroes are good for blowing things up, but drips of mercy in the hands of Jesus are what it takes to transform a world.

Friends, when we expect an action hero savior, we will be disappointed, because that's not the way the story goes. Instead, we're living a different kind of story.

We are hunkered in a building on the outskirts of town, wondering what to do next. And so we whisper to the hero of the story, "What's the plan?" And the hero says, "Wait here while I go around back. Don't make a move until I give you the sign."

"What will the sign be?" we ask.

And the hero answers, "Watch what I do for the hungry and poor and lonely. Watch how I heal and forgive and care. Watch for the drips of mercy. That's the sign. And it's already begun. Which means it's time—time for you to swing into action."