

'The New King gives a New Perspective'

Matthew 11:7-15

Summary

In the generations leading up to John the Baptist and Jesus, the Jews had anxiously waited for the Messiah and his herald, Elijah. As they waited, they dreamed and imagined what would come. Their imaginations became theological arguments, and these theological arguments became doctrine and practice. So set were these dreams in the mindset of John and Jesus's audience that not everyone could understand who John and Jesus were. The message of John and Jesus, being filtered through the minds of their audience, was not always compatible with the expectations of the Messiah and Elijah that had built up and accumulated over generations. So though they had ears, the audience couldn't hear. Though they tried to listen, they couldn't understand.

In regards to John the Baptist as the awaited for Elijah, John follows most patterns set for prophets. As a contrast to the shaking reed (an emblem for Herod Antipas) and the man in soft, royal robes (again, either Herod Antipas, any of the other Herods, or just kings in general), John is a prophet in the desert. The crowd went to the desert, the standard place of divine revelation, to hear the word of a prophet who stood in contrast to the princes and rulers of their times. Just like Elijah stood in contrast to Ahaz Jesus confirms this pattern by stating that John not only is a prophet, but he is also more than a prophet, he is Elijah who is come. However, while John fulfills this pattern of being a prophet, he departs from the expectation of the coming Elijah in one major way: he has been arrested (and will be beheaded) by none other than Herod.

How does this make sense and fit with the expectations of Elijah? Jesus answers by pointing to a major shift in thinking about the kingdom of heaven, and he has alluded to this in chapter 10: the kingdom of heaven has suffered and will suffer violence. As such, John, the Elijah of this kingdom, will not be spared from the violence. In fact, by seeing the violence done to John, the disciples should understand to expect violence to be inflicted on Jesus and themselves.

John, though the prophet of human prophets, was not certain of his role due to his incarceration. As he is completely human, his uncertainty and doubts are completely normal, expected, and even relatable. Yet notice what John does with his doubts: he asks. Matthew 7:7 says, ‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.’ John did not let his own human imagination or vision for ministry fill in the blank left by his questions and doubts. He, also, did not give up. Instead, he asked Jesus for an explanation, and he received it. Due to this, he was able to understand and believe.

Like John, the disciples, and the crowd, we are called to listen. The word used for the violent trying to take the kingdom in verse 12 is *harpazo*, and it’s used only one other time in Matthew: the Parable of the Sower in chapter 13. In this passage, those who hear the word but don’t understand it have the word snatched, *harpazo*, from them like a bird snatches seed on the path. Part of hearing and believing that Jesus is the Messiah is understanding that his kingdom is here on earth, that we are a part of it, and that it will be violently opposed by earthly kings.

Yet we also understand that we have been given promises from God, including asking, seeking, and knocking, that will sustain us and our mission. Rather than get impatient and let our imagination, no matter how well meaning, fill in the blank for us, we must continue to wait on the word of God and listen to where it calls us. We have heard of the words, works, and resurrection of Jesus; we must now continue to listen, to understand and to follow.

Questions

- What prayers do you have that you are waiting on an answer from God? How can the members of your group support you as you wait?
- Having heard of the word and works of Christ, of his death and resurrection, do you understand that the kingdom is here? How do you see it in your life?
- How can you better be a voice of calm and understanding to the people in your life? Can you be this voice to those you are acquainted with but might not know well?