

## **Confusion for Christmas?**

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Matthew 11:2-11

When I was a little boy, my parents used to take me out to the local Thrifty's for Ice Cream. I can't tell you how much I looked forward to those times, dreaming often of my favorite flavors. These days, there are a lot more Ice Cream possibilities out there. Right over here at the Paseo is a Cold Stone Creamery, where you can get any number of flavors laid out on a stone slab with your favorite candies mixed into them.

Now, I know that anyone who's spent any respectable time in Pasadena must know of the Ice Cream miracle known as Fosselman's. While they don't have quite the variety of Cold Stone's, they make up for it in spades with quality.

Bishop Mary Ann Swenson shared with a small group this past Tuesday in a meeting here at FUMC a wonderful illustration about Ice Cream, and I'd like to "re-serve" it here. She observes that those who scoop ice-cream must be multi-talented: aggressively & firmly scooping hard ice-cream with one hand while gently holding that fragile cone in the other. Now, that's talent! Many might not put enough pressure on that scoop to get any meaningful servings of Ice Cream, or conversely might crush that cone in the opposite hand.

Here's another example. A friend of mine with a drum set needed to store it for a while, and I thought my living room might be an ideal place! With a drum set, you have to do one thing with your left hand, another with your right, and then there's both feet doing different things too! I've got to tell you, whether it's ice cream or percussion, I sure get confused! I don't know what hand is doing what...

We know about confusion today, don't we? There's plenty to be confused about. Whether it's the Silly Season or the Holiday, or X-mas, it's kind of confusing what this really is. I think I described it last Advent as the season that begins with Black Friday & ends with a Parade. What's all this about? What are we really doing this for? Is it all about lights and shopping, flowers on floats, and a good meal?

And this Christmas, how many will be away from home in a foreign land fighting a war that is largely unpopular here at home? Meanwhile, our Republican President continues to preach a policy of continuation while a Democratic-controlled Congress continues to fund it! Regardless of differing views on how best to support our troops, I really begin to wonder if doing the same thing over and over again might be the wrong approach.

And where is God in all this? When we think about war in Iraq and Afghanistan, when we see violence in our own streets, when fires rampage through neighborhoods, when somebody takes a gun and begins indiscriminately taking life in a mall or in a church or in a school, where is God? We've heard the story of Jesus' birth today in poetry and song from a tradition steeped in slavery and murder, and yet according to the Not For Sale Campaign, there are 27 million people enslaved *today*.

It's easy to get confused in all this, because we are comforted by the idea of a God who's full of grace and love and compassion. Why doesn't God just sweep in and clean up all the riff-raff? Why doesn't God just *fix* it all for us? Wouldn't that make it easier?

We're not the only ones who are a little confused at the way God works. Even John the Baptist, who preached words of redemption to those who would hear, who warned the people to make way for the coming Messiah; even John was confused.

We read this morning that John is in prison, and we know that he's already met Jesus and baptized him in the Jordan. We know that the heavens opened up and the voice came from Heaven, identifying Jesus. But what's happened to John since then, because here he is now asking Jesus if he's really the Messiah?

Let's think about this for a minute, because John was doing what he was *supposed* to do. He was baptizing, he was preaching a prophetic message of repentance, and he was fulfilling the scriptures: he was the "voice crying out in the wilderness." So here he is, doing all the stuff that he's supposed to be doing. What happens to him? He gets arrested! That's enough to make anybody question, isn't it? I can just imagine what he might have been thinking. "Am I on the right track? After all, a man shouldn't be in jail for doing the right thing, should he? If I was wrong about this, was I also wrong about Jesus?"

And Jesus wasn't much help, was he? What kind of Messiah did the Jews expect? They expected the fire-and-brimstone guy, the great King who would ride in and overthrow all who would oppose them, the descendent of David who would drive the Roman occupiers out of Jerusalem. So who was this carpenter's son? Where were the fireworks?

Now, I assume that John didn't want to make assumptions. We can see from the way he preached that we was pretty direct, and he shows that here too. He asks as directly as he can from prison: "are you who I think you are?"

And he gets his answer. Not only does he get his answer, he gets it in a way that works for him. John preached for a while before he was arrested, and often quoted out of Isaiah. And so Jesus quotes Isaiah right back to him. "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." These are all signs of the Messiah!

John, who was filled with doubt, is filled again with the words of truth. We can guess that he might have hoped for that, we can guess that he wanted his doubts and his fears to be calmed. But Jesus goes a step further. He affirms John and his ministry so completely that any memory of his doubt leaves us completely in favor of admiration and wonder. He's "more than a prophet... No one has arisen greater than John the Baptist."

So let us consider in our own time how our doubt and our confusion might be relieved. When faced with questions about faith in God and in himself, John seeks answers. And how is it that we might seek answers? The simple answer is, Prayer! Now, we know that prayer isn't always simple. In fact, we often get prayer confused with a monologue, don't we? We spend time asking for the things that we want, kind of like a year-round Christmas list; and when it comes time that we've run out of things to ask for, we wrap it up with a quick "in Jesus' name, Amen."

But how often do we take time to listen? How often are we really intentional about it? We're all about *connecting*; we connect to the Internet, to the satellite, to the office, to the wireless world. We know that those connections work both ways. We can send email, and we can receive it too. We speak into our cell phones, and we receive a response. We request a different channel from that satellite way up there

and we get our favorite TV show. So a question to ask ourselves is, do we want to *connect* with God or do we just want to mail off a list of the *stuff* we want?

We all ask questions, and we all seek answers. “Am I doing the right thing? Did I make the right choice? Am I in the right job? Am I following the right path?” Advent is a time to find strength in the stories of those like John the Baptist, who continued faithfully, even in the face of doubt and uncertainty.

It’s in those times that we pray and listen that we find our eyes opened to the grace that’s all around us. It’s in those times that we pray and listen that we find ourselves no longer lost and blind, but found and with sight. It’s in those times that we pray and listen that we find that “the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

And we are filled with grace, that Amazing Grace, that has been promised and has been delivered. Even though we doubt and fear, Amazing Grace is here.

Just this past week I received an email that pointed me to a You Tube video of Wintley Phipps, a Seventh-day Adventist minister and prominent vocal artist. I’d like to close with a few thoughts that he shared on African American music, and one song in particular.

You might be surprised to know that most African American spirituals can be played on just the black notes on the piano. It’s true! Let’s try it.

[Play black notes on piano... then “Every Time I Feel the Spirit” followed by “Swing Low Sweet Charriot]

Now, those Africans crossing the oceans on slave ships didn’t call it this, but that’s the pentatonic scale. On these five notes are built the power and spirituality of the African American spiritual, and it’s beautiful! Here’s another song you might recognize:

[Play “Amazing Grace”]

Many of you know this song, you know these words, and those who know some history know that this song was written by John Newton. He was *not* an African American, he was *not* a slave. In fact, before he found his calling he was a slave trader!

And in finding himself filled with doubt and fear, filled with remorse, he also found himself in need of something bigger than himself. In the middle of the night, his slave ship filling with water, he opened his eyes and his mouth and his heart and he began to pray. His conversion wasn’t instantaneous, it wasn’t until later that he left the slave trade, and almost 20 *years* later that he wrote the words to “Amazing Grace.”

And who wrote the music? We don’t know, but Phipps likens the tune to a West African sorrow chant. So let us take a moment to open our ears to hear God’s call to us. Let us take time to listen, and to experience grace, that Amazing Grace, wash over us in this time. [Sing Amazing Grace]

Thanks be to God. Amen.