

Postcards From The Desert
Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 11:2-11
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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I don't know how your family does it, but in our home, we've usually tried to read the Christmas cards together – at least we did until Ariel went to college. Every night we'd sit at the kitchen table and look over the cards and especially those holiday newsletters. And almost every night, there'd be one where Ariel and I would look at each other and start to crack up, because we had the common thought..."Geez Louise, I'm glad I'm not in that family! Those people are NUTS!" One of the great gifts of the season is a reminder that your family is not so bad after all...

And again, I don't know about you, but every now and then the mail brings a postcard with some exotic scene on it and the first thought in my mind is, "Oh, man, it would be nice to be there..." Because that's one of the purposes of postcards, isn't it – to make you wish you were at that place, rather than where you are now.

John the Baptist wasn't sending out any postcards from King Herod's dungeon. He knows that his time is short, and he sends some of his followers out to double-check on Jesus. They've had a parallel ministry for at least a little while, and now John wants to know, "Is this guy for real?"

And you have to love how Jesus responds. He doesn't try to talk anyone into anything. He doesn't release the poll numbers showing him climbing on the Messiah charts, or flash a quick miracle on the boys. Instead, he turns the question around and basically says, "What are you hearing? What are you seeing?" And he answers his own question: the blind are seeing, the deaf are hearing, the lame are walking, the lepers are being cleansed. And the way that he phrases it is unmistakable – all of his hearers, and certainly John, would have heard an echo of Isaiah 35. Jesus is saying, "Look, friends, the Kingdom of God is on the way! Isaiah pointed to it. John himself pointed to it. I'm here to tell you – the Kingdom of God is here!

The central teaching of Jesus was simply that: the kingdom is near. We can see life the way that it's supposed to be. We can know something about life lived well under the reign and rule of God – that's what the Kingdom is about.

And then Jesus goes on to talk about John for a moment, saying, "Look, John has been out there in the desert, cranking out these postcards – telling you what life in the Kingdom was supposed to be if only you'd stop and listen. He's been reminding you of what you know and pointing you towards what was to come – and look – it has come. And now, I'm here to tell you that the least person on the Kingdom is greater than John."

What the heck does that mean, Jesus? The least in the Kingdom is

greater than John? Really? Last week, we baptized James, Kiayla, and Bella. Are you saying that they are greater than John the Baptist? That I am? How can that be? How does that work?

I don't know. I don't get it...unless...unless I stop and think about my neighbor on Cumberland Street. So far as I can tell, she doesn't know, or care, about John the Baptist. I have never seen her give a second thought to Biblical figures of 2000 years ago. But for some reason, she is willing to say "hello" to me. She acknowledges me as a living, breathing person. For my neighbor, maybe, I am "greater" than John the Baptist.

I think about my neighbors in Nicaragua, who are still recovering from the devastation caused by Hurricane Felix a few months ago. I'm sure that some of them have heard about John the Baptist. But I am grateful for the fact that on our behalf, the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has been supplying them with food, water, and health supplies during these trying times. Maybe, for these people, right now, you and I are 'greater' than John the Baptist.

It's a bit of a stretch, but work with me here...People came to Jesus and they said, "We heard all about this coming Kingdom of God back in Isaiah's day. John's been preaching the Kingdom, and now you, are, too. Are you telling us that it's here? Or not?"

And Jesus says, "Well, if it sounds like the reign of God and it looks like the reign of God and it acts like the reign of God...what do you think?" Jesus was indicating that they had already acknowledged the fact that the Kingdom was apparent to them. It was apprehensible. They could touch it from where they stood.

I think that my neighbor, when she is alone, looking at her child, thinking about her life, rushing around to get ready for Santa and shop for Aunt Martha and buy, buy, buy...I think that my neighbor pauses, at least for a moment, to ask, "What is this about? Is there anything more to life? Is this what it's supposed to be?" Which, when you think about it, is a profoundly theological question.

And it's a question that scares a lot of us. How do we answer such a question? When my neighbor on Cumberland St. or my neighbor in Nicaragua wants to know, "Is life supposed to be like this? Is there a Kingdom? What's it about?", How do I respond?

Some Christians seem to live for those moments. Give them the slightest inkling that you have a question, and these folks are on it like white on rice. They've got the facts and the prophecies, the theories and the charts that prove that Christianity is true and that the resurrection is real and that the only logical thing to do is agree with them...

But that's not what John was about. And that's not what Jesus was about. They were more interested in living the truth, or pointing towards the truths with

their daily lives.

I have an odd task for you today. I want to invite you consider an unlikely prophet – one, who, like John the Baptist, is also dead – but one who has lived more recently.

As I do so, let me ask you this: would you say that you, and the people you know, are more attuned to the wonders of nature than you were five or ten years ago? Would you say that you know more about birds, plants, or animals than you did ten years ago?

If you answered “yes” to that, I’m thinking that in some way, that knowledge might be attributed to Steven Robert Irwin...”The Croc Hunter”. Do you know who I mean? I bet you do. Think about Steve Irwin. How would you describe him?

He was passionate, wasn’t he? Enthusiastic? Almost giddy with joy sometimes. Think about the way that Steve got his message out: he didn’t spend his television show moaning and groaning about the multinational corporations that are polluting the earth. He rarely got all fired up and lobbied us to write to congress to change this or do that. He lived his passion, didn’t he? I mean, he took those cameras along and, crikey, he just lived his love for crocodiles and elephant seals and orangutans and, well, just about every kind of animal. And because he was so joyful, so passionate, so fun – you started to care about the things that mattered to him. His passion led people like you and me to consider our own behavior, to learn, and to grow. He didn’t have to argue with me – because he helped me to fall in love with God’s creation. Do you know what I mean?

What if each of us was as passionate about Jesus as Irwin was about monitor lizards? What if each of us was so full of hope for the kingdom and reign of God?

Can you imagine what would happen if we centered our lives around the kind of joyful vision that is described in Isaiah 35 and Matthew 11? Crikey! What if we give all that we are to envisioning a reality whereby the blind see and the lame walk? Where justice characterizes relationships? Where strength and hope replace weakness and fear?

I’ll tell you what would happen – our neighbors – from Cumberland Street to Nicaragua – would be blessed. They would know more about the truth. They would be more able to see what life is about. They might even be hungrier for Jesus. They would surely know more about God’s Kingdom and intentions.

I mentioned a few moments ago that one of the purposes for postcards is to make you wish that you were there – wherever “there” is.

Today, on this third Sunday of Advent, I want to ask you if you are willing to live as a three-dimensional postcard for the Kingdom of God? Will you seek in

the days and weeks to come to live so honoring God's intentions that your neighbors might think, "You know, I'm going to have to get there someday...because that looks like a good place to be."?

And here's where I want you to start: at home. My challenge for you today is simple: love your brother, your daughter, your grandmother, your sister...with the kingdom love of Jesus. Be a blessing. Act like the time you've spent in worship this morning has done something to stoke your love for Jesus, and go out and spend that love on the people that you live with. Amen.