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# Sermon: Isaiah 35.1-10, Psalm 146, and Matthew 11:2-11

KATIE HAYS

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By the time Jesus of Nazareth came on the scene, the people of God had been waiting for a long time. Deut 18:15-22 promised that God would, in God's good time, raise up "a prophet after Moses," a leader who would usher in a new era of liberation and prosperity for Israel. In their search of the scriptures for help in identifying the prophet to come, Palestinian Jews settled on the miracle catalogs—rhythmic lists of signs—sprinkled throughout the prophetic and poetic writings. Such catalogs drew from a familiar set of healing and restoration miracles that would both reveal and validate the new Moses.

In a paper presented to the Society of Biblical Literature, David Frankfurter identifies the "new Israel" hymn in Isa 35:5-10 as a "charismatic paradigm" of the prophet after Moses.<sup>1</sup> He further shows Isa 35 to be an archetype ("the earliest example of the form")<sup>2</sup> for the numerous, apocryphal Christian miracle lists concerning Jesus that circulated (mostly orally) among believers and were later used by the church fathers in their writings. The canonical gospel writers, too, were aware of the "prophet after Moses" tradition and Isaiah's charismatic paradigm. Frankfurter finds "reflections of the Mosaic miracle-list in both Mark and Q,"<sup>3</sup> and of course the *semeia* source for the Gospel of John is assumed by most scholars to have been exactly this kind of recited catalog. Clearly, early Christians believed Jesus to have completed the "checklist" of the scriptural catalogs and thus to be the promised inaugurator of a new age.

Frankfurter suggests that the easily memorized form of the miracle lists would have made them a familiar component of the oral/aural sharing of scripture among Jesus' contemporaries. "[I]t is entirely likely that if one were to ask a first-century Palestinian Jew about 'the prophet,' s/he would be able to list five or six of these miracles."<sup>4</sup> Further, some sectarian exegetical scholars of that era likely would have made a career of combing and combining the miracle lists from scripture and oral tradition in support of their eager and active longing for the new age.<sup>5</sup>

The *Revised Common Lectionary*<sup>6</sup> pairs Matt 11:2-11 with Isa 35:1-10 for the third Sunday of Advent,<sup>7</sup> adding Ps 146 to the mix as an example of the miracle list as prayerful worship. In the sermon that follows, I ask the listener to imagine a very particular *Sitz im Leben* for the recitation of an Old Testament miracle list: John the Baptist, imprisoned by Herod, chanting scripture and praying while he paces his cell. Matthew

11:2ff. describes an interchange between John and Jesus (via John's intermediaries) that includes a quotation from Isa 35:5-10. The quote is on Jesus' lips, but Frankfurter's work suggests that any first-century Jew, and perhaps John especially, would have been watching to see whether Jesus could be "the prophet after Moses" on the basis of his miraculous activity.

Thus, John's question and Jesus' answer in Matt 11 are fat with meaning, standing as they do



in a stream of biblical tradition about the “one who is to come” and the catalog of signs that will affirm that one’s identity. “In the word and deed of Jesus the awaited redemptive sovereignty of God has entered history,” says G.R. Beasley-Murray.<sup>8</sup> Redemption’s completion, however, has not yet been revealed. John’s experience parallels our own: The miracle catalog of Isa 35 confirms Jesus’ identity but does not promise immediate or universal relief for Christian believers. And so, like the people of God for generations before us, we wait.

### SERMON

Oh God, may our words this hour give honor and praise to the word made flesh, your son, Jesus, whose coming we celebrate in this season and always. In his name, amen.

The prophets of old were used to God interrupting their days in a variety of ways. There were visions in the night. There were voices from the sky. There were natural disasters, burning bushes, words written in stone, still, small voices, and 100 other ways for God to get in touch with those who had the gift. But those modes of communication were pretty singular. In other words, those were private messages for the prophets alone. God spoke to one prophet at a time, and then had the prophet talk to the people.

The specific content of those messages could be just about anything, but they had one theme in common: God’s reign will someday be made known to all people in an unmistakable way. The task of the prophets was often the task of describing to everyone else what it’s like when God comes near. How do you know if God has come near? The prophet would say, “Look around. When God comes near it will be like this. These are some of the things that are going to happen when it happens.”

Like every household in America, you’ve probably been receiving catalogs in the mail for some months now in anticipation of Christmas gift-giving. Catalogs are books filled with page after page

of gifts from a particular manufacturer that promote a certain kind of lifestyle. If you live in the suburbs but wish that you lived in a log cabin and chopped your own firewood, you can order from the pages of L.L. Bean. Catalogs are long lists of the items you need, theoretically, to live like that.

Isa 35 is a kind of scripture called a “catalog.” There are dozens of these catalogs in the Old Testament: long lists of all the things God is going to do when God comes near. How many of these sound familiar?

“The eyes of the blind will be opened.” “The ears of the deaf will be unstopped.” “The lame will not just walk but leap like deer.” “The tongue of the speechless will not just talk but sing for joy.” “The prisoners will be set free.” “The hungry will have food.” “Those who are bowed down or oppressed, widowed or orphaned, or strangers, will be cared for in special ways.”

Many of these are familiar to us not because we know the Old Testament prophecies where the catalogs first appeared, but because we have seen them in the gospels, in Jesus’ ministry of good news. But the prophets saw them first in their visions. God apparently didn’t want there to be any confusion when it happened. “When God comes near to make his reign unmistakably known to all people, let there be no mistake. Let God’s people understand what it’s going to look like.”

**The task of the prophets was often the task of describing to everyone else what it’s like when God comes near.**

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called “Joy Sunday.” On this Joy Sunday, we have heard three catalogs read from the Bible. There was one in Ps 146. There was one in Isa 35. The third was not read from the Old Testament, but from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 11. Jesus says, “You want to know if I’m the one God promised? You want to know if God has come near? Look around. Look at what God has done.

‘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.’ Look around.”

And right there, we find our joy. We look around at our lives, and the lives of the ones we love, and we say, “Yes, God has done that. God has been here. I have seen it. I myself was blind, or lame, or downtrodden, or untouchable. God has healed me, has lifted me up, has touched my life and given me joy.”

And he has done it through the coming of Jesus. That’s why we celebrate the birth of this little baby, because this little baby represents the intersection of all that is human—our flesh and blood, our limitations, our mortality—and all that is God—infinite love, limitless power. God has come near, and extraordinary things have happened in our lives. And for that, we praise God. The psalmist says, “Praise the Lord, o my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.” And all the people say, amen.

But—can I be perfectly frank with you for a minute? I come to “Joy Sunday” with less enthusiasm than you might expect. I don’t come to the Christmas holidays with unmitigated joy. I deck the halls a little bit, but I’m not necessarily jolly while I do it, and while there is plenty of merriment for me to really mean it when I wish you a merry Christmas, it always comes for me with a little bit of melancholy on the side. I am told that I am not alone in this, and that in fact, some people get downright depressed during this season. People who celebrate with partial families where there used to be whole families. People who remember sad things, bad things that happened around Christmas, because bad things don’t stop happening no matter how few shopping days are left.

I don’t mean to just depress you to death, OK? But I don’t think I could anyway. If you’re flying high from the effects of a holly-jolly Christmas, then pay no attention for the next few minutes. But if you, like most people, have to work a little bit, or a lot, to muster the appropriate seasonal joy, then you should know

**Our experience tells us that our joy is not complete, that not all of the blind have been made to see, that not all of the downtrodden have been lifted up. We have our own catalogs, see, lists of places that don’t seem to have been touched yet by the hand of God.**

that you’re not alone, and that this sermon and this season are not designed to persuade you to feel joy to the exclusion of all other emotions.

That would not be faithful to our experience, for one thing. Our experience tells us that our joy is not complete, that not all of the blind have been made to see, that not all of the downtrodden have been lifted up. We have our own catalogs, see, lists of places that don’t seem to have been touched yet by the hand of God.

Just this week, my catalog has gotten longer.

In the mail came an envelope addressed to Mr. and

Mrs. Lance Pape, which means that it was from one of my grandmothers. Inside was a rhyme about reindeer and children and one line written in my grandmother’s spidery hand: “Hope to see you when you’re home.” Sounds simple enough, but I know my grandmother, and I know that there are layers of hidden messages in that line, including her fear that her grandkids won’t drive the extra four hours to New Mexico to pick her up and drive back to my parents’ house, and after about 24 hours, drive four hours back to New Mexico to deliver her safely home.

E-mail this week made my catalog longer. Distressing news from David F’s workplace, where he is on the front lines in the battle to protect children from the people who are supposed to love them most,<sup>9</sup> added pages to my catalog. A lament from a friend whose life is being torn apart in a church that cannot quite live up to the promise to see her gift, not her gender, added pages to my catalog. A forwarded message from

someone who's really mad at me and probably just forgot to remove my address from her mass-mailing list added pages to my catalog.

The newspaper delivered to my house brought more pages for my catalog. Kids being helped to cheat on tests so that their schools could stay out of trouble; jails used to keep the homeless off the streets and out of sight. Have these places been touched by the hand of God? Have these deserts been made alive by the flow of living water?

My point is that not all the blind have received their sight. Not all the lame are walking again. The captives have not all been freed. My grandmother, like all of us, is a captive of her failing body and her family relations. Those kids in David's care; an enemy who used to be a friend; impoverished, broken people who choose to sleep on the street rather than in shelters. They are captives, too, like all of us: captives of sin, our own and everybody else's. These things go in our catalogs. Our joy is not complete. God has come near, but our joy is not complete.

John the Baptist, the central figure of the Advent season, sits in prison waiting for Herod's sentence. Or rather, he paces. He has always been a high-energy person, so even in this tiny cell he can't sit still. He paces, three steps this way, three steps that way, reciting to himself in the dark. He has been called a crazy man, and worse, and the filth that has collected on his furry clothing and in his wild hair only makes him look crazier. And now he's talking to himself! But the words are familiar to him, and to us. We can hear John, quietly reciting the prayerful poetry of the psalmist, from Ps 146. He's known it since he was a child.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
 whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth,  
 who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry.  
 The Lord sets the prisoners free.  
 The Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
 The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down.  
 The Lord loves the righteous,  
 but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.  
 Praise the Lord!  
 [repeat as if davening, prayerfully reciting]

John knows about Jesus, of course, knows that something extraordinary happened that day at the Jordan when their paths crossed and Jesus was baptized. He suspected that this meant God had come, had finally come to establish God's reign over all people in an unmistakable way. He has heard rumors, even while in prison, that the prophets' catalogs are being fulfilled, that the things predicted by Isaiah and celebrated in the psalms are coming true. He's heard, but he hasn't seen. The test, you know, was always the same: You want to know if God has come near? Look around. Look around and see.

But when John looks around, he sees four walls. He remains in prison. And that doesn't connect for him. It just doesn't work. If God has come near, why is he still in chains, afraid for his life?

The next time some disciples come to bring him a meal, he has an errand for them.

Go find Jesus. And don't just stand in the crowd this time. Go right up to him and ask point-blank: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we supposed to be waiting for someone else?" Tell him the Baptizer awaits his answer in a prison cell.

So the messengers go, and they ask Jesus. "Who are you?" they query. "Look around," he answers. And he quotes for them a catalog from the Old Testament, one of the lists of things that happen when God comes near. But he quotes the one from Isaiah 35, the one we heard this morning, which has all the right elements

in it—sight for the blind, hearing for the deaf, everything you would expect, save one. It just happens to leave out one that John remembered from Ps 146: “The Lord sets the prisoners free.” Jesus knows exactly where John is. And so his reply is two-sided.

See, on one hand, John’s messengers can say, “Yes, God has come near.” The predicted catalogs are being fulfilled. He is the one. Miracles are happening. But on the other hand, John’s messengers can say, “The work of the kingdom is not complete.” Not all of the blind have their sight. Not all the deaf have their hearing. And John knows very well that not all the captives have been made free. Miracles are still extraordinary. They’re not happening to everyone, everyday. The transformation isn’t complete.

John knows it, and we know it. The joy of Christmas, when we celebrate the coming of our Lord and king to a Bethlehem stable, is marred by the melancholic recognition that some of us still wait in prison, suspecting but not knowing for sure whether God really has come near, and whether that has any bearing on our present captivity. And so we wish you a merry Christmas, but we’re not 100 percent sure in our heart of hearts that you can have one. Our joy is not complete.

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Well, now, that’s not very Christmas-y, is it? Not very merry, jolly, gay, or happy. But it’s not a grinch view of Christmas. It’s the truth about Christmas. The truth is, God has come near in Jesus, and the work of the kingdom of heaven has been inaugurated. Some miracles have happened, but they are still the exception to the rule. That’s what John’s disciples had to report to him. “There is joy, John. There are miracles. The kingdom is breaking in, but it is not yet complete.”

The truth is, we stand in a long line of God’s people before us who have waited, more or less patiently, for God to come near once and for all and usher in the kingdom. The joy of Christmas isn’t just that he came, but that he is coming again to finish what he started. Then we will all be free. Your sight will be restored, your hearing unimpaired. Your weak knees and drooping hands will be strengthened. You will be free from the prison of your sick body and your troubled mind. The chains will be broken, for all people, when God comes near to finish the work of the kingdom of heaven. And we wait.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

And we wait. Lord Jesus, come quickly.

#### **KATIE HAYS**

Ms. Hays has been a minister at the West Islip Church of Christ in West Islip (Long Island), New York, since 1997. She earned a master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School and is currently pursuing a doctor of ministry degree at Princeton Theological Seminary.

#### **ENDNOTES**

- 1 David T. M. Frankfurter, “The Origin of the Miracle-List Tradition and Its Medium of Circulation,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1990 Seminar Papers*, ed. David J. Lull, Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers Series (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990).
- 2 *Ibid.*, 372.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 351.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 363.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 The Consultation on Common Texts, *Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).
- 7 Advent is the season of four Sundays preceding Christmas during which Christians anticipate and prepare for the coming of the Lord at his nativity and at the eschaton.
- 8 G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 83.
- 9 David F. is a social worker who serves on a team investigating cases of alleged child sexual abuse.