



You've Got The Wrong Man

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

John 1:19-23

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, he did not deny but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" And he answered, "No." They said to him then, "What are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

It could have been a script right out of a television police drama. As the police are handcuffing their suspect, he looks over his shoulder and protests, "I didn't do it. I'm not the one you're looking for. You've got the wrong man," he says.

"Yeah, right," the policemen answer, "if you're not the man, that means everybody else who saw you do it is wrong!"

On television dramas, the police always know when they've got the right man.

Just like the leaders of the Jews two thousand years ago knew that they had the right man. They knew they were right when they sent out their policemen to arrest John the Baptist.

They knew they were right. After all, all the evidence pointed them in the right right direction, right to John!

When John came on the scene a few months before this incident, he caused quite a commotion. When he started preaching to the people and baptizing converts,

- when his reputation grew and his following increased,
- when people started talking about him over their morning doughnut and coffee at the corner Tim Horton's -

- even the religious leaders started paying attention to him.

The Sadducees and the Pharisees, the Scribes and the Levites, the local leaders of the Jews out there in rural Galilee - they all started paying attention to John. They wanted to know what he was doing. They wanted to know what he was saying to the people.

So, they joined the crowds down by the riverside. They watched John in action. They listened to what he had to say. They didn't like what they saw or what they heard.

They sent their reports back to the head office in Jerusalem. "We've got a potential problem here," they reported. "We've got a trouble-maker on our hands," they noted. "We've got a fellow who is stirring up the religious zealots again," they warned.

So, the powerful few up there in Jerusalem, the members of the Sanhedrin and the Chief Priest decided they had better learn more about that man the people were calling, "The Baptist." They sent out their spies to watch him. They sent out their spies to record what he said. They sent out their spies to monitor the situation.

When the spies reported that John was stirring up the people, when they said that John was attracting a sizable following, when they said the situation was incendiary, the Chief Priest said, "Bring him in for questioning."

Can you imagine the scene? The temple policemen made a special trip down from the city of Jerusalem. They went in their official uniforms. They went in formation. They went with force out across the desert, down through the valley, over to the banks of the Jordan River. They saw the crowds of people around him. They saw him standing waist-deep in the muddy waters. They waded out into the stream and tapped him on the shoulder, "You better come with us," they said. "You're under arrest," they said. "You're wanted in the city for questioning," they said.

"You've got the wrong man," John the Baptist said.

"If you've come thinking I'm the messiah,

"If you suspect I'm the savior of the world,

"If you figure I'm the one everyone's been waiting for,

"You've just got the wrong man," John said.

The leaders of the Jews had made another mistake. They thought they had the messiah, but it turned out they had the wrong man!

What we have here, in today's scripture lesson, is the official questioning of John the Baptist by the religious authorities. We know they had the wrong man. They had the wrong idea about who John the Baptist was.

Look at the way they started out their interrogation. The first question they asked him was, "Who are you?" And his first answer was, "I'm not the one you're looking for."

They thought they had caught the messiah, but they had the wrong man.

It was a case of mistaken identity. But it didn't end with the Baptist. Down through the years, people have continued to search the world, looking for their savior. A lot of people think they've found him, but they've got the wrong man, too.

Maybe you have made the same mistake, too. You're a good person. You come to church looking for a meaningful messiah. You come searching for your savior. You come counting on contacting Christ - and maybe, just like those priests and Levites two thousand years ago, you end up with the wrong man!

It is particularly dangerous this time of year. Because, a lot of people think that Jesus Christ is just like that jolly old elf they see climbing down their chimney. And, they predict he will leave piles of packages under their tree this Christmas Eve. Yes, they're sure they've got the right kind of savior, the kind who will give them every thing they want.

Yes, they think that Jesus Christ is like that fat fellow all dressed-up in red and white who carries an over-stuffed bag of toys slung over his shoulder. They think Jesus Christ will bring them wealth and happiness all wrapped up with a bow.

But, they're mistaken. They've got the wrong man!

This time of year there are so many people who get confused and think that Jesus Christ is Santa Claus with a sleigh-full of goodies for every good boy and girl. They think that with a nod of the head, or a wink of an eye, or a tip of the hat - that they can get whatever they want out of him.

It's a case of mistaken identity.

They think faith can be got cheaply down in the bargain basement of life.

They think religion is a holiday affair.

They think Jesus can be bought off with a prayer or two and an occasional dollar tossed in the offering plate.

They think God can be persuaded to change His mind by a desperate pleading for help on a rainy day.

They think following Jesus is going to make them rich, and keep them from getting sick.

They think being a disciple of Christ will guarantee a life of smooth sailing forevermore.

They even think Jesus will run over to bail them out of whatever trouble they've gotten themselves into.

Well, you know as well as I do that if they think that way, they've got the wrong man. Because, that's not the way Jesus Christ works.

When people search for a savior today, too many of them pick the wrong man; because just like those priests and Levites from today's gospel lesson, they don't know who they're looking for!

When you read on in the Gospel of John, you'll come across the time when John the Baptist had to point out the messiah to all the people who were looking for him. "There he is," John said, "over there - 'behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.'" [John 1:29]

What a predicament they were in. The religious leaders, and the savior seekers, and the shepherd needers didn't even know who they were looking for.

They were so off the mark,

- they were so wrapped up in looking for the wrong thing,

- they were so confused about what the messiah would look like,

that John had to point him out when he was standing right

in front of their own eyes!

"There stands one... whom you don't even know," John said. [paraphrase of John 1:31,33] Still, today, a lot of people continue to look for Jesus, but they don't even know what kind of savior they're looking for. It's no wonder they can't find him.

Maybe that describes your own predicament today. Maybe you're just confused about who Jesus really is. Maybe you just don't recognize the savior when he stands at your door and knocks.

So tell me: Who are you looking for?

If you're searching for a shepherd to save you -

- if you're hungering for a prophet to point you to the right path -

- if you're floundering for a friend who will forgive all

your sins -

- if you're looking for a light to brighten up your darkest corners

-

- if you're suffering and want relief,

- if you're mourning and need comfort,

- if you're angry and demand justice,

- if you're depressed and want to laugh again,
- if you're all alone and crave company,
- if you're running on empty and need refueling,
- if you're on the lookout for Jesus Christ and haven't been able to find him yet -

- maybe you've been looking at the wrong man.

Whether you recognize him or not, Jesus Christ is always there. He is here. He is all around. But like those priests and Levites, maybe you've been looking at the wrong man all along.

Too many people look for Jesus and expect to see flashes of light, or chariots of fire, or angelic choirs singing in the heavens. You've been around long enough to know that God rarely works that way. But, people are still on the look-out for something spectacular to happen. Maybe that's why so many people miss out on knowing Jesus.

Jesus has a way of slipping in and out of people's lives before they even suspect anything was happening. They never imagined that Jesus would work like that, because they were looking for the wrong man all along.

They were looking for some impressive incarnation.

They were expecting some supernatural sensation.

They were waiting for some momentous moment.

But, Jesus doesn't bring those things to most people's lives.

Instead, Jesus comes creeping into their lives in the form of some ordinary man or woman,

- with acts of simple kindness,

- with helping hands,

- with tender mercies.

If you spend your waking moments looking for the wrong man, Jesus can come and you'll never know it. Because so very often, Jesus might come as a stranger, but then again, on another day, he might come as your best friend. He comes in the ordinary and the average. He comes quietly and unannounced. And if you're not aware of the kind of man Jesus is, he'll come and you'll never recognize him.

So this Christmas season, make your life ready to meet him. Make straight the highway to your heart, so he can come right in. Be prepared to meet Jesus Christ in circumstances that are humble. Be ready to find Jesus among the ordinary. Be open to discover Jesus in the every day moments of life.

Whenever you turn around, he might be standing right before your eyes. So be on the look out for Jesus. You never can tell how many encounters you might have with Jesus this coming week.

I hope you will be on the look out for Jesus this Christmas season. Just be careful. Don't end up looking for the wrong man.

John the Baptist gave you a clue as to where you might find him. Jesus stands among you as one you do not know. So, expect to come across him wherever you are. He might show up as a stranger. He might take the form of one of your friends. He just might show up anywhere -

Even here!

And when he does, if you're prepared, you'll know it deep in your heart. You've got the right man!