

“Be strong and do not fear”

Isaiah 35:1-10

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Isaiah 35 has a title in my bible. The title reads, “The Joy of the Redeemed.” What a fitting passage for the Sunday when we light the third candle of Advent, the Candle of Joy. After the prophet highlights what the coming king will do, the passage ends with an exultant vision. “They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” (Isaiah 35:10) You have to go back a bit in Isaiah to understand what will lead to this joy, this everlasting joy that will crown the heads of the people, this joy that will overtake them in such a way that sorrow and sighing will flee away. A king will come. Isaiah 32 begins with these words of promise. “See, a king will reign in righteousness...”

The joy of the redeemed, the joy that will fill the hearts of the people when the king who reigns in righteousness comes, that joy is the result of some familiar trademarks, or signs that will accompany the coming of this righteous king. “The eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame will leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.” I say these trademarks, these signs are familiar, because when called upon to give record of what he has been doing, Jesus says about himself, “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” (Matthew 11:5) It’s almost as if Jesus wants us to connect the dots. The righteous king will come. These things will happen...the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute...oh, and really, about a hundred other things Jesus has been doing as he brought healing and hope to so many. Jesus wants to know, “Is there anyone out there who can connect the dots about who I am?”

If there is anyone out there who can connect the dots, the perfect candidate to put two and two together is the man we know as John the Baptist. John the Baptist came to prepare the way for the anointed one who had been promised to Israel. John anticipated how great the coming

one would be. “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” Oh, John has high expectations for the coming one. If Jesus is that one, who better than John the Baptist to connect the dots?

In reality it is not as easy as I make it out to be. In Matthew 11, where Jesus describes his ministry of bringing healing and hope, John the Baptist is the one who has not been able to connect the dots about Jesus. We are told in the eleventh chapter of Matthew that John sent his disciples to Jesus with the express purpose of asking Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:3) Many who interpret this passage are convinced that John the Baptist is not sure Jesus is the one. That is why he sends his disciples to ask if Jesus is the one. And if Jesus is not the one, should they keep looking for someone else.

What dots are not there for John? What other dots does John need to make the connection that Jesus is the coming one, the long-expected Messiah, the King of Israel? John’s very own words give us a big clue. When he appears in the wilderness of Judea and begins baptizing in the Jordan River, John says, “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:11,12) How will John the Baptist know the anointed one has come? There will be judgment on all the unfaithful. The winnowing fork of God’s wrath will separate the wheat from the chaff, and the chaff will be burned up with unquenchable fire. Jesus, I see your work with the blind and the lame, the poor and the oppressed. But you are missing some very important dots. Where is the judgment? Where is the fire? Where is the vengeance? You can bless the peacemakers all you want, but if you want us to connect the dots, there better be some heads that roll.

Why else might people not be able to connect the dots about Jesus? Look at the great King David. The coming one would be the heir of the Davidic kingdom. What kind of a king was David. David had some muscle, some might, some military achievements. It is the military triumphs of David that get him in trouble with the reigning king, King Saul. The crowds are so impressed with David, they come up with a little ditty. “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.” If you are going to be a king from the line and lineage of David, pull up your sleeve and show us your muscle. Toward the end of David’s life, the writer of Samuel enumerates David’s warriors and the wars in which they shined. Jesus, where are these dots, the ones about your army, your artillery, and your arsenal? David had thousands of warriors. Jesus, how can we connect the dots when all you have are a ragtag bunch of fishermen and tax-collectors following you around.

Solomon, David’s son, ascended to the throne following David. What dots did Solomon bring? Solomon brought a kingdom with a shining temple, a spectacular palace, and a stockpile of treasure that boggles the mind. The temple is described in great detail, the columns and towers and furnishings, and how long it took to build it all. Then we discover Solomon’s palace took just about twice as long to construct and we can assume cost about twice as much to build. No problem. Solomon had bank. There is a line describing the prosperity of Solomon’s kingdom that is a classic blend of truth-telling and boasting. “All King Solomon’s goblets were gold, and all the household articles in the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. Nothing was made of silver, because silver was considered of little value in Solomon’s days.” (I Kings 10:21) Jesus, if you want us to connect the dots, show us your budget, your buildings, give us a little boasting about your bankroll. That is going to be hard to do, because Jesus tells us, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” (Matthew 8:20)

If Jesus is the King who is coming, he is going to have to connect the dots that Israel was expecting him to connect, the prophetic judgment and fires, the squadrons of soldiers and the might of the military, the buildings and the bankroll. If we cannot connect the dots,

then we will have to ask, along with John the Baptist, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

Israel is not just looking at their own expectations. Their expectations were influenced by the world in which they lived. Israel was part of what is described as the Greco-Roman world, a world profoundly influenced by the Greeks and the Romans. The leader who embodied the breadth and reach of the Greek empire was Alexander the Great. By the age of 33, Alexander ruled over almost the entire known world. Jesus, how old are you? About 33? You talk an awful lot about the kingdom of heaven but look what Alexander did in the same amount of time. If you want us to connect the dots, what do you have to show in terms of an earthly kingdom.

Caesar ruled Rome. We know from the gospels that there were plenty of coins printed to honor Caesar. Isaiah told us that when the great leader of the Israelites came mountains would be laid low and valleys raised up. Caesar probably yawned and said, “Been there. Done that.” I mean, the roads the Romans built, connecting their vast empire, were astounding. They raised valleys. They laid mountains low. And again, from the gospels we know that all Caesar had to do was declare a census and the whole known world hopped on their donkeys and started making their way to the town of their birth. Remember, that is very reason Joseph and Mary traveled that cold and dark night so many years ago from Nazareth to Bethlehem of Judea. People connected the dots, and they called Caesar Lord. Jesus, if you want us to call you Lord, help us, help us, help us to connect the dots.

To his credit, Jesus does not add any of the dots the people seemed to be expecting. Jesus is secure in his understanding of who he is and what his kingdom will be. Jesus is putting out the dots that he has been called to put out, and just because David, Solomon, John the Baptist, Caesar or the great one known as Alexander trot out all their various dots marking their achievements and accomplishments, Jesus will not be anyone except who he is called to be by God, his Heavenly Father. So, speaking of Caesar, let me make a slight change in Marc Antony’s famous speech and say, “I come not bury Jesus, but to praise him.” This sermon is not a sermon denigrating Jesus for what he did not do, for the

dots he did not connect. This sermon is to praise Jesus, for being exactly who was, and who he is, and who he was meant to be.

In praising Jesus, it is worth noting how all those connected dots worked out for some of the rulers we have mentioned. When Peter preaches in Acts chapter 2, on that great day of Pentecost, he lets us know David is safely tucked into his tomb, but Jesus has burst the chains of death and he is alive. We learn how little Jesus is impressed with all the finery of King Solomon when he says, “Solomon in all his splendor was not even dressed as nicely as the lilies of the field.” What is left of Alexander the Great? I have been to Macedonia, the Greek area where Alexander ruled. I bought this nice souvenir. There is a statue along the waterfront in Thessaloniki. The statue rests on a base that is five meters high. The statue itself is another six meters in height. Meaning if you are about a hundred meters offshore, you might, maybe, barely, be able to see the statue. Wow! And yes, if you like Brandy, you have to hand it to Alexander. It is a tasty drink. But come on, would you take what Alexander accomplished in his 33 years instead of what Jesus did in his 33 years? Caesar has a glitzy little gig going in Vegas, and his salad is still popular on many menus. I have a little joke I make about Caesar that works better in print than in person, a little play on words that says all of the Roman that remains is some Romaine, but I hesitate to say it in fear that Caesar will roll over in his grave and say, “Etu, Bubba?”

It is not necessary to deconstruct the dots of the rulers whose expectation were placed on Jesus. What we learn from all the dots of all the other rulers is that their dots connect them to something higher, to a larger sphere of influence, more power, more wealth, more might, more fame, more fortune. Not so with Jesus. Jesus is not interested in those kinds of dots, not one single bit. That is what he told the devil when the evil one’s temptations came flying fast and furious. Stones to bread! Jump off a high place. Worship me and I will make you the ruler of this whole world. Jesus, don’t these dots tempt you? Jesus says, “Not at all.” When his own disciples did want those kind of dots...not just for Jesus, but for themselves, when James and John wanted to be seated on thrones of glory, Jesus told them, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28)

Jesus is not interested in dots that raise him up and elevate him above others. The life of Jesus is full of dots that descend, that lower him down to the place of a servant, that humble him, because he was the King who served, the Lord who took off his outer robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and did the work of a servant, washing the feet of his own disciples. Jesus gave his life as a ransom, offering himself on the cross. Yes, Jesus was lifted up on the cross, but only because he was about to be thrown down and placed in a tomb, condemned, rejected, crucified, dead, and buried.

And yet after it was all said and done, after Jesus had risen from the dead, a wonderful thing happened. His followers, his disciples, they connected the dots. Peter connected the dots. Peter tells the huge crowd that first Day of Pentecost, “Let everyone be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, who was crucified, God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah.” (Acts 2:36). By the end of that day, many, many people had found that they could connect the dots. “Those who accepted the message Peter had been preaching were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” (Acts 2:41)

And it did not stop there. Today, today in this very room, we have a wide array of signs and symbols that connect the dots. All these beautiful creches that adorn our sanctuary help us to adore the one whose birth they celebrate. Two thousand years old, and we still celebrate his birth with reverence and praise. In honor of the birthday of Jesus Christmas Eve and Christmas Day will be celebrated around the world, in so many cultures with varied customs you cannot keep them all straight. All who celebrate his birth connect the dots, almost as if each and every candle that is lit as people sing sacred songs like Silent Night, if you could stand far enough back to see all those lighted candles, lifted high by faithful believers, you would see dots that encircle the globe, a testimony that people from every corner of the earth have connected the dots, believing that God so loved the world he gave his One and Only Son, that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life.

When we were ministering in Fresno, California, we worked with college age students. We opened our home up, they came and ate, played cards, babysat the kids, and often spent the night. Wonderful friendships

were formed, friendships which have lasted more than 20 years. There is a street in Fresno they light up at Christmas time. They call it Christmas Tree Lane. Cars form a long line and drive through, admiring the festive lights strung up on all the homes. Instead of driving our cars, the college group walked up and down Christmas Tree Lane. We had a guy from France that year in our group. His name was Samuel. Samuel had come over to work in the church on an internship.

As we were walking up and down Christmas Tree Lane, Samuel saw a little area with a piano and a place for a choir to stand and sing carols. He got a big smile and called us together. We didn't know it, but that guy could make a piano come to life. As Samuel started tinkling the ivories, we harked the herald angels and we told it on a mountain, we brought joy to the world and we let our voices ring with gloriiiiiaaaa in excelsis deo. Then Samuel played *Silent Night*. It was one of those moments, it was one of those moments when it all seemed so right. It was one of those moments when all the dots connected. I looked at those young people, each one a part of our family, each one so dear and precious to us, each one singing with a passion that shined in the darkness of the night, each one worshiping Jesus with every fiber in their being. How can I even describe how it felt that night, knowing that these young people we loved so much had connected the dots? They knew who Jesus was and they loved Jesus. As the dots connected, all was calm, all was bright, and we rejoiced in that precious heavenly peace.

What we didn't know was that there was a microphone hanging over the makeshift choir loft. Our singing was being broadcast all up and down Christmas Tree Lane. And the traffic had come to a complete halt. People stopped to listen to the good news. People stopped to hear the witness. People stopped to join in the worship. People stopped to share in the joy. Christmas Tree Lane is about three miles long. Glancing down that street, a street filled with cars, that stream of headlights was like a series of dots, dots connected for mile after mile, stretching down the street like the love of Christ has stretched down through the ages. On that night, all the dots connected. Someday, someday, someday, all the dots will be connected. Someday, someday, someday, everyone will

know that Jesus Christ is our King. When all the dots are finally connected, on that day there will be joy for the entire world!