

What Did You Go Out to See?

December 14, 2025

Luke 1:46-55

Matthew 11:2-11

“What did you go out to see?” Jesus asked the crowds, referring to the ministry of John the Baptist. “A reed shaken by the wind?”

I rather like that image, even though I suspect, along with Biblical scholars, that I don’t really understand it. It’s probably a first century phrase that has long since fell out of regular use. But would you go out to see grass blowing in the wind? (Well, I might, but I’m a photographer and I’ve been known to take pictures of grass blowing in the wind.) I just imagine a somewhat large reed growing from the riverbank and giving off a low tone as the wind blows across it. Instead of the voice of the prophet, you’d get the voice of the wind and the reeds.

Now, I suppose you might prefer that to someone who greeted his visitors with “You brood of vipers!” But would that bring you out? Probably not. You might come out to see someone wealthy and showy – that describes most big concert performers, come to think of it. You’d go out for those. Lots of people do.

Neither musical grasses nor well-dressed people brought people out to see John the Baptist. As Jesus put it, they came out to see a prophet, and more than a prophet. They came to see one who might give them some hope for a radical change in their condition. They came out because they were poor, and were going to stay poor, and they hoped that someone could change that. They came out because they were treated at best with indifference by the rulers of their day and at worst – all too frequently at worst – with casual cruelty, and they hoped that God cared about that. They came out because they knew they weren’t living by the laws of Scripture, and they knew that they needed to seek God’s forgiveness. They came out because forgiveness through the Temple was expensive: they had to bring sacrifices. They came out because John said they would find forgiveness with a simple – and inexpensive – bath in the Jordan River.

It was concerns like that which brought them out to see Jesus, too. Jesus didn’t baptize, but he and John shared their basic message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” It’s also possible that it was John’s arrest that prompted Jesus to begin his preaching ministry. According to Matthew 4, Jesus returned to Galilee after John was imprisoned.

Quite aside from their shared experience of John’s baptism, they shared a message and they shared an offered hope. They may even have shared some time and some conversation. Perhaps they made plans. If they did, Herod’s decision to imprison John interrupted them.

Whatever may have been the case between the two of them, each of them brought out the crowds, and I would guess that most of those in the crowds wanted the answer to some variant of the question John's messengers brought to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" As James Boyce writes at Working Preacher, "Along with John we say, 'Give us more data.'"

Well, what was the data?

There's healing, and healing that restored people to their families and to their communities. Lacking sight, difficulties with mobility, the inability to hear, different kinds of diseases: all of these are conditions in which people can live with dignity and respect, contributing to those around them and to society as a whole. That was less true in the first century, when there was no Americans with Disabilities Act. Any of those people would have had to beg, which is a degrading way for people to survive, and those with some skin diseases would have been forced out of their homes entirely. Jesus acted not just to relieve people's pain and suffering, he also acted to restore their relationships with others.

In our days, I have to tell you, we have all the power we need to maintain and even strengthen the relationships we have with people with challenges to sight, hearing, mobility, and overall health. Relatively few of us have the power to change the conditions of the body – with acknowledgement of the medical professionals among us – but all of us can treat people with full respect and honor their worth. We can welcome their contributions to our society and make the accommodations which permit them to live fruitfully. We can make sure that there are curb cuts on the streets at pedestrian walkways. We can, oh, I don't know, use a font that is more easily read by a screen reader. We can set aside our prejudices and take up our commitment to regard all people as created in the image of God.

Karri Aldredge has a particular insight about good news and the poor. She writes at Working Preacher, "Of particular note is Jesus' final statement: 'The poor have good news brought to them.'

"This phrase is often interpreted as sharing the gospel with the poor. The Greek reads, more literally, that the poor are gospelized. They don't just receive good news. They experience it. This reflects the long list of actions Jesus has just named. Those most vulnerable in society—like John in prison—receive the gospel not only through words but through actions and community relationships."

I like that. In Jesus, the poor don't just listen or hear. The poor get good newsed.

"Perhaps the work of Christ," writes D. Mark Davis at leftbehindandlovingit, "is a way of resisting any system – whether imperial, political, medical, social, or religious – that de-humanizes and de-communalizes life. For many years I have had a definition of sin as 'anything that is destructive of life and community.' I think that definition and this description of what the reign of God through Christ looks like are very complementary."

If that is the work of Christ – to bring humanity back to human beings, whether they have been oppressed by law, prejudice, illness, injury, custom, church, and death itself – if the work of Christ is to restore humanity to human beings, then that's something worth coming out to see. That's better than a well-dressed public figure. That's better than a row of reeds singing on the wind.

What have you come out to see?

There are better things you could do with a Sunday morning. Think of all the things you could do to make yourself happy. Starting with sleeping late, for many of us, right? A nice leisurely start to a low-anxiety day, and low-anxiety days are precious, few and far between. There might be things you'd like to read, or craft projects that keep your mind and fingers engaged. You might experiment with some new delight, or take care of those nagging chores you didn't get to during the week. Seriously. There are much better things you could be doing than sitting around listening to me.

Except.

If we're here, we just might get some hints to the answer to that question: "Are you the One, Jesus?" We might just make a connection with that One. We might just deepen our relationship with that One over weeks and over years. We can't count on these things strengthening steadily, no. John showed that. He baptized Jesus and he still had to ask that question when things went sideways for him. None of us live lives of faith without going through times of doubt and living through times of shadow.

So we're here to be our messengers to ourselves, to ask John's question for ourselves, to make that connection with Jesus and find out who he is for us and for all those around us. We keep trying, because, as Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "...who Jesus is is not a pronouncement. Not a sermon, a slogan, or a billboard. Who Jesus is is far more elusive, mysterious, and impossible-to-pin-down than we have yet imagined. The reality of who Jesus is emerges in the lives of the plain, poor, ordinary people all around us. We glimpse his reality in shadows. We hear it in whispers. It comes to us by stealth, with subtlety, over long, quiet stretches of time."

What did you come out to see?

Whatever that might be, you saw the signs of the One who humanizes humanity. You heard it in the words we read. You experienced it in the welcome greetings that came from the others gathered here. You felt it in some movement of your soul, one which you may not be able to describe but which you know is real.

Here you have sought and found the signs of the Christ.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson