

“Finding God in the Waves: Jesus Is a Pretty Big Deal”
Matthew 11:1-6

In his book *Christ of the Celts*, John Philip Newell tells this story, "A number of years ago, I delivered a talk in Ottawa, Canada, on some of these themes. I referred especially to the prologue of the gospel of John and his words concerning 'the true light that enlightens everyone coming into the world' (John 1:9). I was inviting us to watch for that Light within ourselves, in the whole of our being, and to expect to glimpse that Light at the heart of one another and deep within the wisdom of other traditions. At the end of the talk, a Mohawk elder, who had been invited to comment on the common ground between Celtic spirituality and the native spirituality of his people, stood with tears in his eyes. He said, 'As I have listened to these themes, I have been wondering where I would be today. I have been wondering where my people would be today. And I have been wondering where we would be as a Western world today if the mission that came to us from Europe centuries ago had come expecting to find the Light in us.' "

It is sad to think of the many ways Christians have struggled to fully accept Jesus' radical way of love throughout our history. This struggle shows up in our inability to love as he loved and to live in ways that bring healing and wholeness to us and to others. We even project that inability to love onto God.

In his book *Finding God in the Waves*, Mike McHargue talks about his struggle with understanding Jesus as a "substitute" for us before God. He describes it this way, "The idea that Jesus' death was a sacrifice to erase the sins of humanity is called penal substitutionary atonement. It's the idea that Jesus' perfect, sinless life made Him worthy surrogate to take on the punishment that the rest of humanity had earned...God sent himself in the form of his own son to sacrifice himself to himself so that he could save humanity from *himself*."

You can see in this way of understanding the life and death of Jesus, people tend to project their own violence and fear onto God. Throughout history, people have understood Jesus in so many different ways and that still stands today. For example, the Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions "view sin less as a crime to be punished and more as a sickness to be healed."

This struggle for understanding Jesus is not new. The disciples struggled with this as well. Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, also wondered about Jesus. He knew Jesus. He knew about the coming Messiah. He knew what Jesus was doing. After all, John was the one who baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. He was his cousin. And even though John was in prison at that point, he must have been able to keep up with the ministry of Jesus because John's disciples would have been visiting him daily to provide him with food. Prisoners at that time depended on family and friends for their daily food. John had all that information and all that knowledge, but somehow he wondered if Jesus was truly the one whom he was expecting as the Messiah, the promised one to liberate the people of Israel. The reality of Jesus didn't match up to the mental image John had of

the Messiah. This was true not only of John the Baptist but also of many around that time. Part of the problem for John and others like him was that Jesus somehow did not fit into their presuppositions and expectations of who the Messiah was going to be. In John's mind, the Messiah was supposed to come with the vengeance of the Lord upon the wicked ones. The Messiah was supposed to come and destroy the evil doers in order to bring forth God's justice and peace. That is why John began to question whether Jesus was truly the one sent by God. "Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?"

It is fascinating to see how Jesus responded to John's questions. He did not answer him with a "yes" or a "no." Instead he challenged his interpretation and understanding of the scriptures. He responded to him using several statements from the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5-6; 42:8, 17; and 61:1). And in that selection Jesus left out the phrase, "The day of vengeance of our God" from Isaiah 61:2. You might say that Jesus was selective in what he quoted from Isaiah. He was reinterpreting the scriptures to John the Baptist to show him a different way of understanding the Messiah. Jesus' mission was about liberation, healing, and restoration. Yet, John the Baptist needed to know that Jesus was not going to be a military leader. He was not going to bring a violent revolution to the land. Violence and vengeance were not going to be part of the picture. The apocalyptic visions of the Messiah were supposed to give hope through metaphors. They were not seen as literal manifestations of God committing violence against the evil doers.

This was such a challenge for John the Baptist because he wanted justice, but what John needed to learn was that justice and restoration in God's way do not come through violence and coercion. In fact, much of what Jesus taught was a slap in the face to many! He taught about loving the enemy and those who persecuted them. He taught a radical way of transformation because Jesus knew that this is the way of true love and healing. The evidence he gave of his identity as the Messiah was the healing of those around him who were in need.

This is a challenge even for us today because we expect God to judge people like we judge them. We expect God to be on the side of the same political party we support. We expect God to right the wrongs of our world through power that is often violent. In his book, *The Powers that Be*, Walter Wink notes that, "We should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us so that we may be children of this strange Parent, who 'is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked' (Luke 6:35). Much of what passes as religion denies the existence of such a God. Is not God precisely that moral force in the universe that rewards the good and punishes the evil? This had been the message of John the Baptist, and it would later be the message of the church. In John's preaching, God is depicted as verging on a massive and final counteroffensive against evil in which all evil will be exterminated. One whole side of reality will be wiped out... Jesus, by contrast, understood judgment not as an end but as a beginning. The penitential river of fire was not to consume but purify, not annihilate but redeem (Luke 15:1-32; 18:9-14). Divine judgment is intended not to destroy but to awaken people to the devastating truth about their lives... Judgment no longer is the last crushing word on a failed life, but the

first word of a new creation... He [Jesus] did not wait for them to repent, become respectable, and do works of restitution in hope of gaining divine forgiveness and human restoration. Instead, he audaciously burst upon these sinners with the declaration that their sins had been forgiven, prior to their repentance, prior to their having done any acts of restitution or reconciliation. Everything is reversed: you are forgiven; now you can repent! God loves you; now you can lift your eyes to God! There is nothing you must do to earn this. You need only accept it."

Turn to your neighbor and share with them how you see this love alive in our world today?

Jesus is the founder of our faith and thus his life, teachings, death, and resurrection are so central to our faith with the invitation to see his pattern of life as the way God shows us our path of life.

This is such good and challenging news. The salvation which Jesus brought us is about healing our brokenness so that we may feel and know how sacred everyone is. It is not about giving a special status. It is about allowing us to live into our true identity.

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<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/love-made-flesh>

McHargue looks at the resurrection in the same way. He writes this about the power of Jesus resurrection as the pattern of God's healing of the world, "The universe itself exists in an eternal pattern of life, death, and resurrection...In Jesus, I hope for more than just a God with a face or a uniquely gifted moral teacher. I hope for a resurrection that will one day reach every corner of our universe. As I've said, Jesus is a pretty big deal." Amen.