

There’s one in every crowd. Most of us learn at some point that just because we think something that doesn’t mean we should say something. We come to understand the wisdom of *Proverbs 17:28 (NRSV)* *Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent.* Or in Abe Lincoln’s words, “It’s better to be silent and thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.”<sup>1</sup>

We learn to keep our mouths shut, but there’s one in every crowd who in Ron White’s words “[has] the right to remain silent but lacks the ability.”

John the Baptist was that guy. When Herod Antipas, the tetrarch (read local despot) in Galilee divorced his wife so that he could marry Herodias, the wife of his brother Herod Philip, most people looked the other way and held their tongues. Not John; he called it as he saw it; he named names. Herod Antipas was unhappy; Herodias was furious – lethally so. Sinner that he was; Herod Antipas feared God’s judgment, so he tried to find some middle ground between God’s wrath and Herodias’s wrath by ordering John’s arrest and imprisonment in his fortress Machaerus, which is located on a remote hilltop near the Dead Sea.

John’s disciples brought news of Jesus’ ministry, and he remembered that miraculous moment when he baptized Jesus, the sky was ripped open, the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, *Matthew 3:17 (NRSV)* *And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”*

That memory sustained him through the difficult days and lonely nights, but his time in that cell wore on him; doubts plagued him; the longer his imprisonment lasted the more he wondered if he’d ever be free again. Had he given his life in vain? He had to know, so he sent his disciples to ask the question, *Matthew 11:3 (NRSV)* *“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”*

Jesus’ answer seems straightforward enough; but in fact, it is a breathtaking claim. It’s the answer John is seeking; the answer that offers us a Merry Christ Mass.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/abraham\\_lincoln.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/abraham_lincoln.html)

## ❶ The Answer

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Jesus’ answer seems straightforward; I always thought it was simply an objective reporting of what was going on in his ministry: *Matthew 11:4–6 (NRSV)* “*Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*”

That seems objective, because that is what the gospels report; but when we factor in Psalm 146, Jesus’ answer gives John a reason to joyfully exclaim, *Psalm 146:1 (NRSV)* *Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!*

For in Psalm 146, the Psalmist sings, *Psalm 146:7–10 (NRSV)* *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. The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!*

By invoking this Psalm, Jesus tells John who he is and what he is doing.

Who is he? Jesus is Lord. He is the One who is worthy of praise. He is the One who is worthy of worship. He is God. For he is the One who is opening the eyes of the blind; he is the One who is lifting up those who are bowed down – the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the dead; he is the One upholding the widows and orphans bringing good news to the poor. He is the One!

What he’s doing is a bit more subtle; notice that in the Psalm we have the 5 consecutive phrases that begin “the Lord.” Scholars suggest that these 5 “the Lords” reflect back to the 5 books of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Thus, by identifying himself as “the Lord” in Psalm 146, Jesus is saying that he is the One who is fulfilling the covenant God made with Abraham, completing the law God gave to Moses, and creating the people God formed through Moses. He is leading them (us) through the present wilderness to the Promised Land that is the reign of God.

Thus, to John the Baptist (and to all who wonder if it's worth it), Jesus is saying, “Your work is not in vain. You have not lost. You are not defeated. The way of the wicked will come to ruin. “The Lord will reign forever.””  
John, I am the One you've been waiting for. Rejoice!

And when John's disciples brought him the answer, I suspect that old firebrand grinned from ear to ear. His wait was over; his job done. He had seen the Lord's Messiah and prepared the way. Hallelujah!

## 🕒 Merry Christ Mass

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I'm wishing folks “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Holidays,” because my first few “Merry Christ Mass” and “Happy Holy Days” greetings resulted in the puzzled expression I know how all too well. So now when I wish folks “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Holidays” I'm saying to myself, “Merry Christ Mass” and “Happy Holy Days.”

Perhaps this is for the best, because my goal in this practice isn't to make any political statement or score any points in “the war on Christmas.” My goal is to remember what God has done for us.

A preacher I heard last week offered a helpful reminder that to “remember” is to literally put back together, to re-member. And the opposite of re-member is dis-member; to tear apart.

That's the challenge we face in Advent. We have so much to do and so little time to do it; and/or, our heart wants to give a lot but our wallet only has a little. We're torn between expectation and reality.

We're torn, and we wonder if one of these days it will tear us apart. We're not in a prison cell like John, but we may find ourselves in a pretty dark place. Throw in the lack of sunshine and the lovely weather we've been having, and the darkness deepens. “Are you the one who is to come?”  
Where are you Christmas?

Psalm 146 offers us the Biblical method to put our spirits back together and keep them together; we remember in the midst of our dismemberment; we worship and sing: “Praise the Lord” or in Hebrew – hallelujah! Worship lifts us from our distress – be it Herod Antipas's fortress Machaerus or our

own sense of being torn apart when expectation generates desperation. We remember by celebrating a Christ Mass.

Granted, we Presbyterians aren't big on masses. Somewhere in Geneva, John Calvin is spinning in his grave at the thought. I won't digress on the differences between a Protestant worship service and a Roman Catholic worship service; my point is simply to remember that what this season is about is worshipping Jesus, and in particular, marveling at the choice of God to embrace our humanity at its lowest so that He could lift us from our distress into the peace of His presence. When we remember this, darkness flees before the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, who says at Christmas, “Let there be light!”

And in the midst of the broken darkness, all heaven breaks loose; a Grinch's heart grows, a Scrooge discovers generosity, and thousands gather to make a dying girl's wish come true. In that light, we, the people of God cannot help but stand with that heavenly host and sing, “Hallelujah!” “Praise the Lord!” Merry Christ Mass!

Walter Brueggemann expressed the power and the possibility of this singing lifestyle: “Israel holds doxology against the powerful staying force of the rulers of this age. Israel sings, and we never know what holy power is unleashed by such singing. Israel sings, and we never know what human imagination is authorized by such singing. One reason we may not sing is that such hope is intellectually outrageous. Another reason we may not sing is that such an alternative is our delight. We name this staggering name—and the world becomes open again, especially for those on whom it had closed in such deathly ways—the prisoners, the blind, the sojourner, the widow, the orphan. The world is sung open. Against this Holy One and this song, death cannot close the world into injustice again.”<sup>2</sup>

There's one in every crowd; one who sings the Lord's song. Will you be that one? Will you be the one who remembers? Jesus is Lord. Sing that song, and have a Merry Christ Mass. Hallelujah! Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Psalm 146: Psalm for the Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost,” *No Other Foundation* 8/1 (Summer1987) 29.