

Have You Found What You're Looking For? Week Two
Is. 11: 1-10, Romans 15: 4-13, Matthew 3: 1-12
Advent 2007 – December 16, 2007

There are some variety of opinions about what Bono is specifically referring to in this classic song for which I have chosen for an Advent theme: *Have You Found What You are Looking For?* According to the blog featuring fans who are wrestling with its overtly Christian references it may represent the feelings of one searching for proof of Christ. Others think it refers to a Christian on a journey for a deeper spiritual meaning to his life. Both of those work for our Advent season in which we look for a savior. I have to tell you that this second verse that we just heard is the most obscure. He sings:

*I have kissed honey lips
Felt the healing fingertips
It burned like a fire
This burning desire*

*I have spoke with the tongues of angels
I have held the hand of a devil
It was warm in the night
I was cold as a stone*

*But I still haven't found what I'm looking for
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for*

If there is a “honey lips” in all of the Bible it must be John the Baptist, who I refer to simply as “JB.” Grasshoppers and honey were his food. He was clothed in the desert not in a fashionable camel hair coat but in the ascetic robe of a monk. From the very beginning of all the gospel stories Jesus and JB were closely paired in their birth and upbringing. Both burned with the fire of passionate faith and spiritual prophecy. They

possessed the healing touch that is released to those who they touched by repentance and forgiveness. They spent time in the wilderness, feeling the heat of the daytime Sun and the chill of the nighttime moon. After Jesus is baptized just a little after our text this morning he experienced both the tempting hand of the devil and the compassionate presence of angels in the Judean desert. Both lived lives of intense spiritual searching.

JB had a substantial following of disciples before Jesus began his public ministry. We are told that great crowds from Jerusalem, Judea, and all the region were going to him for baptism. I wonder what those first baptismal candidates who went to JB were looking for. There had not been a prophet in Israel for four hundred years. The fire of Isaiah and Jeremiah had long since cooled. Religious life had become relatively calm again. The leaders were comfortable back in the Temple, although Rome ruled, there were left alone to practice their religion, as long as they did not stir things up. I suspect given the times things were ripe for reform. So imagine you come before JB for baptism in the Jordan. You are surrounded by a great crowd. This is a baptism for forgiveness of sins. Now you get to make a public confession before all of these people. I remember early in my recovery from alcoholism having to make a confession before one person. I remember how difficult that was and how I procrastinated for so long. But what sweet relief to do it! Can you imagine revealing your deepest, darkest secrets before a crowd like this? But they did it anyway because they were in such a deep need for spiritual connection with God.

And how about those Saducees and Pharisees? He are the religiously powerful, the leaders of the Temple priesthood and of the synagogue, the Rotary Club and City Council, going for full confession before this man with honey lips. Imagine the pride

they have to swallow and then what happens? JB calls them a pack of snakes. He calls them into true confession. He asks them to show proof of how they will reform. He says, “Don’t tell me that just because you come from royal religious blood of the priesthood that you are good. You have to start completely from scratch.” And then he gives them this powerful image that points back to Isaiah that we heard from today. The cedars of Lebanon, the ones imported to build the original temple, were the largest, most majestic of all the trees of the land. When they were cut down they fell hard. These religious leaders were the cedars of society. But JB told them they had to be cut down to size so that they could be truly fruitful in the coming reign of God. For JB was the one who came to prefigure the Christ, to get the people ready to hear his radical message of reform. He looked for a new spiritual maturity in a people who had grown spiritually lazy.

This morning I want to deal with an aspect of spiritual maturation that has to do with self-differentiation. One of the marks of maturity is in being self-differentiated: from your family of origin and the culture around you that pressures you to conform to a set of limiting expectations. That can range from choosing your profession to choosing your partner to choosing your understanding of God. Jesus and JB were perhaps the two most self-differentiated characters in all of the New Testament. They lived in a time of powerful family expectations. After all they both had Jewish mothers, didn’t they? Jesus had expectations of his public ministry from his family. His family asked him to leave it and come home. He asserted his calling even as an adolescent as he said, “I must be about God’s business!” At his first sermon in his hometown in Galilee the townfolk mumbled, “Isn’t that Joseph’s boy?” They probably thought, “Shouldn’t he stay in the

carpentry business?” How about JB’s family of origin? Both his mother and father came from priestly lines – Elizabeth from the great line of Aaron and Zechariah from the priestly line of Abijah. The expectation is that the boy would stay in the religious occupation of Temple priest, right? But instead he leaves for the monastic life to live in solitude and answer a very different call to hear God out in the middle of nowhere. Can you imagine the talk around town when he announced this to his friends and family? But both Jesus and JB showed spiritual maturity by becoming who God called them to be, not mom and dad. Expectations of the Hebrew community were powerful. Sons of Abraham and daughters of Sarah had privileges bestowed upon them. They were the cedars of the community. And here JB says that everything must be cut down to nothing for the coming reign of God. For it is only from that stump that the new growth of reform can flower.

As a little boy many referred to me as “little Lee.” My dad’s name is Lee and I look pretty much just like him. I felt both pressure and some calling to follow his example and begin a career in information technology. He had excelled in that career himself. There is so much that I learned from my dad – lessons about life and business. But I am not my Dad. It took me a few years to figure that out. Recently we had a family reunion and my Dad prepared this family history with photos and written histories on both my mother’s and dad’s side of the family. The histories go back over four generations. I learned about the in-laws, outlaws, heroes and horse thieves on both sides of the family. My dad talked so frankly about his family history – those qualities of human goodness – of generosity during the depression when they had so little – of leadership in the community and in the church. And he also talked about the elephants in

the room that had long stayed silent but we all knew about. He wrote with candor about his mother's and brothers struggles with alcoholism that resulted in their premature deaths, both at the age of 56. I found it so liberating to read about these honest accounts of my family. It gives me insight into my gene pool and where I came from. It lifts up family strengths to celebrate and systemic family issues to deal with. If you have never done it before, I commend to you all to map a genogram of your family. It is a family tree of your own family going back three or four generations. As you trace the branches of your family, it is amazing what you will find that will give you insight into yourself.

So what is the value of self-differentiation as we look for God in this Advent season? Self-differentiation does not mean cutting down the family tree to its roots or discarding all that is good in our families of origin. But I believe there are lessons from JB that speak to us from this gospel text this morning. JB speaks bluntly to all those around him and it probably got him killed when he spoke so bluntly to Herod. But we too must speak with courageous honesty – about ourselves, about issues that affect our hearts, and with love to those who challenge us for who we are. We also must speak with humility. JB said “if you think what God is doing through me is special, you ain't seen nothing yet.” He takes his substantial set of followers, which included Andrew, and said to them, “join up with Jesus, because he is the true light. I only point to the light.”

Humility is to know that we always point to a greater light. And in that light, in the way that it burns with an unquenchable fire, is the way in which our lives can be purified. We become children with pure hearts through the unquenchable fire of Jesus Christ. JB uses the image of separating the good grain on the threshing floor from the waste, the chaff, as the farmer holds up the whole product with the fork and lets the ruah, the breath of God,

separate the two. I want to close this morning with an Arabic proverb shared with me in a goodbye card from my best high school friend, Raef Hussein. Raef was my Egyptian friend in my senior year. As I left for Texas for college and he left for American University in Washington, D.C. he sent me this card (paraphrased in my mind) which I reflect is the way that God works reform in our lives... God takes the stuff of our lives, separates through his loving grace the wheat from the chaff, works the wheat into God's perfect will, and with a puff of kindness, blows the rest away." Amen.