

**WHAT ARE YOU SEEKING?**  
*Sermon for Advent 3C—Mt 11:2-11*  
LPC, 12/15/13

Deciding to pursue ordination was not an easy thing for me. I struggled with the issue for about eight years. Of course, during this time I consulted my spiritual director. I remember speaking with her once about how this question of pursuing ordination was continuing to bother me. I was praying for clarity on the matter, I told her, but whenever I thought about going to seminary I was stopped cold by thinking of my husband and children. How could I fulfill my obligations to them while returning to school?

“How do you know,” she asked mildly, “that God isn’t waiting to bless your husband and children by your return to school?” She pointed out that when I prayed for clarity I pictured my husband and children. Could it be that this association was the answer to my prayer? I had concluded that thinking of my family was a sign I should not go to seminary, but was getting no peace from that conclusion. My director suggested that what I thought was a problem was indeed the answer to my prayer. She challenged me to reinterpret what I regarded as obstacles, suggesting that these so-called obstacles were perhaps not obstacles at all, but the key to understanding how God was trying to move me.

I was still sufficiently unconvinced that I took another two years to enter the official diocesan discernment process. But the memory of that conversation stays with me, and helps me not only in my own ongoing vocational reflections but in my own spiritual direction practice with others.

When people are sufficiently troubled or concerned to raise a subject during spiritual direction, I always ask, “What have you been praying for? Could the unease you’re experiencing be an answer to your prayer?”

The initial reaction is almost always denial. “No,” the person will say, “the situation is why I’m praying, not the answer to my prayer.” And then I say, “Are you sure?” And sooner or later, more often than not, the person says, “Well, maybe. I’ll have to think about it,” and by the next session we have a lot more to talk about how God is working in that person’s life.

If people pray to God for help, why are they always surprised at the idea that what they are experiencing, especially if they’re feeling prodded by something, may be God’s response? Yet, I’ve been dense myself in this regard. My directees have been dense in this regard, and the people around Jesus seem to have been dense in this regard.

Many of the people around Jesus had been praying for the coming of God’s promised Messiah. They read prophecies like today’s lesson from Isaiah. They longed for God’s salvation. They associated this salvation with the opening of blind eyes and stopped ears; with the healing of the lame and mute. From descriptions like Isaiah’s they had very concrete ideas of what salvation would look like.

Salvation would look like earthly power. It would look like the destruction of enemies, especially the hated Roman Empire. The Messiah had to be a mighty king and warrior, didn't he?

Then along comes Jesus, and he's not what people expect. He's not organizing an army, or planning a rebellion. The people are confused. They are troubled. When they ask Jesus to clarify, he asks them, "Well, what do you see? What are you experiencing? The blind see, the deaf hear. What more do you need?"

The thing was, they had so many preconceived notions of what the answer to their prayers would look like that they failed to recognize the fulfillment of the prophecies they claimed they were praying for. No wonder Jesus asks them, "What did you come out to see?" What did you expect? They obviously had been so busy expecting a king of power and wealth, that they failed to recognize salvation when it was right in front of them.

Since Advent is a time of looking for the Coming of Christ, we do well to ask ourselves, what exactly are we looking for? What do we expect to see? What exactly are we praying for? Could it be that what is right in front of us is the answer to prayer? And why should that idea be so very startling? Do we have so many preconceptions about how the answers to our prayers should look like that we fail to recognize that the answer to our prayer could be right before us? Even if what's before may look like a problem rather than a solution?

Jesus often answers prayer with a challenge to our current way of looking at things. I'll say that again because it's the main point of this sermon, and it's something people often miss: Jesus often answers prayer with a challenge to our current way of looking at things.

What did you come out on this snowy morning to see? What are you praying for? Now, as Jesus himself suggests, ask yourself, "What do you hear and see? What, in what you hear and see, is consistent with what we know about the coming of the Lord? Wherever that thing is, the answer to prayer will be somewhere nearby.

This week's word to add to your armor of light is patience, mentioned in the Letter of James. Patience goes very well with what I've been talking about. If we have to get our minds around the idea that God may be acting in a different way than we expect, we also have to get our minds around the idea that God may be acting in a different time frame than we expect.

To illustrate this concept, I end with a story that Bp. Klusmeyer shared in the last issue of Koinonia, the diocesan newsletter. A man was given the opportunity to ask God whatever he wanted. So he asked, "What is eternity like?" God answered, "Like a second." The man then asked, "What's it like to have a million dollars?" God answered, "It's like having a dime." The man's eyes lit up and he asked, "God, can you spare a dime?" God answered, "Sure. Wait a second."