

What If They'd Asked?  
(For The Daughters of the King Assembly, March 16, 2024)

Our reading from John's Gospel this morning describes the point where the Temple authorities really started to come unglued. It was the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, *Sukkot* (סוכות) in Hebrew, a harvest festival that commemorates the Exodus. In Jesus's day, Hebrew law required observant Jews to come to Jerusalem for *Sukkot* and stay in temporary shelters while they prayed for rain and celebrated their liberation from Egypt. Each day, water was carried up to the Temple and poured over the altar in a special ceremony. *Sukkot* was immediately followed by *Shemini Atzeret* (שְׁמִינִי עֲצֵרָת), the Eighth Day of Assembly, a holy day that extended *Sukkot* with more prayers, readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, and rest from work.

Jesus's brothers invited him to travel with them to Jerusalem for *Sukkot*. Jesus told them to go without him, then followed in secret and spent a few days alone at the festival listening to what people were saying about him. His reviews were mixed. Some called him a good man, others accused him of deceiving the crowd, and no one spoke too loudly for fear of attracting unwanted attention from the Temple authorities. Halfway through the festival, Jesus went to the Temple and started teaching. The priests and scribes were shocked that an uneducated Galilean peasant could teach so well. He argued with them, the onlookers argued with each other about who Jesus was, and the angry Temple leaders contemplated arresting him. The tension built until *Shemini Atzeret*, when water wasn't carried to the Temple and Jesus cried out his invitation to anyone who thirsted to come to him for living water instead. Fed up, the religious leaders sent their police to arrest Jesus, but the police couldn't bring themselves to do it and the crowd continued to argue about him. Nicodemus the Pharisee, who had visited Jesus and knew something of his teachings, put in a timid defense of him, but the exasperated religious leaders were having none of it. They insisted that Jesus couldn't possibly be a prophet or the Messiah, no

matter what the “accursed” crowd might believe, because “no prophet [was] to arise from Galilee.” Those scholarly priests and scribes insisted that the laws prophecies were clear, and no one knew them better than they themselves did, period.

As Tim Rice cleverly observed in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, “Israel in 4 B.C. had no mass communication.” Without the softening influence of modern media, Jesus and his contemporaries all had regional accents. Justin Taylor of *The Bible Coalition* cites Anglican scholar and cleric R.T. France when saying that, “Galileans spoke a distinctive form of Aramaic whose slovenly consonants (they dropped their aitches!) were the butt of Judean humor.” Having grown up in Nazareth, Jesus might well have spoken with a strong Galilean accent. That would have instantly branded him as an ignorant country bumpkin in the minds of the priests and scribes. His clothes were probably humble and inexpensive, made of undyed, homespun wool, and his hands might well have been calloused and scarred from working with his father. He probably didn’t look or sound anything like the sophisticated city dwellers of Jerusalem imagined the Messiah would. No wonder the Temple leaders were so confident when they dismissed Jesus. To them, he looked and sounded like just another Nazarene pauper.

The religious authorities weren’t wrong about their prophecies. They just overlooked one crucial fact. Those prophecies foretold that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem and the royal House of David. Someone in the crowd mentioned that, but the religious leaders had already made up their minds that Jesus was a nobody who hailed from Galilee. They never thought to ask him where he’d been born. If they had, they would have been very surprised.

Such slavish devotion to prophecy may seem a little silly to modern minds, but it was enormously important in the early days of Christianity. That’s why Matthew began his Gospel by tracing Jesus’s genealogy all the way back through David to Abraham, and Luke gave us his

enchanting story of Jesus's birth. Both evangelists wanted to assure their readers that Jesus really was the Messiah whom the prophets foretold. When he promised to give believers eternal life and living water, that promise came not from an impoverished Nazarene who couldn't possibly keep it, but from the embodied Son of God who absolutely could. Jesus's followers needed to believe that in the early years of the church. Two thousand years later, so do we.

It would be wrong to come down too hard on the religious authorities. They took a principled position based on what they thought they knew. If Jesus hadn't been who he was, his claims would have been outrageous, blasphemous, and extremely dangerous. Having zero tolerance for rebellion, Rome crucified thousands of Israelites. The last thing the Temple leaders would have wanted was any hint of insurrection that would give Pilate an excuse to turn the *Sukkot* festival into a bloodbath. They had ample reason to discourage their people from following someone they thought was probably a liar, a madman, or a megalomaniac.

Still, I can't help wondering what would have happened if Caiaphas and his subordinates hadn't allowed their outrage to overcome their curiosity. People who engaged with Jesus usually came away convinced that he was the real deal. Nicodemus seems to have been persuaded, and he ranked near the top of the Temple hierarchy. And there was plenty of evidence that Jesus was something special. A great many people had seen him exorcise demons, feed multitudes, heal the sick and injured, and even raise the dead. Those aren't things a country bumpkin can do.

We can't know what would have happened if the Temple authorities had asked Jesus where he was born. Maybe he would have dodged the question or found some other way to tick them off. If he was as determined to carry out his Passion as many theologians believe, a few questions wouldn't have stopped him. Unfortunately, though, the Temple's brilliant, superbly educated religious leaders missed a priceless opportunity to speak face-to-face with God. Just

imagine how different history might be if they had been open-hearted enough to let Jesus teach them, and us, how better to obey his Father's laws.

So, what does all of this have to do with us? We moderns are buried in a daily avalanche of information that may or may not be accurate, scores of images that may or may not have been photoshopped, and uncountable opinions, "expert" and otherwise, that masquerade as fact. Someone is always demanding our money, our time, and our allegiance. To protect our sanity, we have to choose whom and what to believe. We become resistant to anything that conflicts with our personal views, especially when we're confronted by someone who thinks differently than we do. If some scruffy fellow with a discordant accent claimed to be the Son of God today, we might well dismiss him as a madman, a fraud, or a blasphemer, too.

Jesus having been glorified, though, the Holy Spirit is still very much in our midst, making good trouble in all sorts of divine, mysterious ways. If our eyes are closed and our hearts are hardened, we might miss the priceless opportunities that she offers us, just as the Temple authorities missed their chance to learn from the only begotten Son of God. It's not that we can't have opinions and principles. It's that we mustn't close off our hearts and minds to the point where we can't recognize a miracle even when the Holy Spirit plunks it down right in front of us.

As Daughters of the King, you've embraced a Rule of Life that calls you to prayer, service, and evangelism. The Holy Spirit will help you if you're open to her nudges and whispers. She might even invite you to come and play as she brings the Kingdom to earth. My prayer for you is that you will live faithful, principled lives, confident in Christ's love, and that you will also remain hopeful and open-hearted, eager to see and participate in the Holy Spirit's miraculous work. May she surprise you, delight you, and bless you today and every day of your lives. And if you're ever unsure of what she's up to, may you always remember to ask. *Amen.*