On Friday, Jill and I had a nice time going around to a bunch of locally owned shops and stores as we looked for a few things for members of our families for Christmas. We like to support our local business owners as much as we can. We did go to the mall briefly also. Almost everywhere we went we saw people from church which was nice. For us it was an enjoyable day and an opportunity to have time together and a nice lunch. Shopping for some folks, however, especially at this time of year is not always enjoyable and nice; sometimes it can be quite stressful.

A man observed a woman in the grocery store with a three-year-old girl in her shopping cart. As they passed the cookie section, the child asked for cookies and her mother told her "No." The little girl immediately began to whine and fuss and the mother said quietly, "Now Ellen, we just have half of the aisles left to go through; don't be upset. It won't be that long."

He passed the mother again in the candy aisle. Of course, the little girl began to shout for candy. When she was told she couldn't have any, she began to cry. The mother said, "There, there, Ellen, don't cry. Only two more aisles to go, and then we'll be checking out."

The man again happened to be behind the pair at the check-out, where the little girl immediately began to clamor for gum and burst into a terrible tantrum upon discovering there would be no gum purchased today. The mother patiently said, "Ellen, we'll be through this check-out stand in five minutes, and then you can go home and have a nice nap."

The man followed them out to the parking lot and stopped the woman to compliment her. "I couldn't help noticing how patient you were with little Ellen..." The mother replied, "My little girl's name is Tammy... "I'm Ellen."

Patience doesn't come easy to most of us. I am very thankful I was not in the absolutely terrible traffic that came with the snow storm in the greater Boston area on Thursday, however, I also was a little puzzled by the response to the snow. This is New England in December, snow is not a surprise, and we have the advantage over our ancestors of actually knowing when it is coming. You adjust your expectations, get indoors, hunker down, and enjoy the beauty of it – unless it is Sunday morning in which case we come to church. Award winning author and Nantucket resident Nathaniel Philbrick, who wrote "Mayflower" and "In The Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the
Whaleship Essex” – two terrific books that chronicle the incredible perseverance, toughness, and determination of earlier residents of this region – “used the word crybabies to describe peoples’ reaction to Thursday’s storm, one that set no records, and came as no surprise.” Philbrick said, “The fact is, once you get used to these modern conveniences and luxuries, even the mildest inconveniences become an epic tale of deprivation. Perhaps our threshold will be so diminished [that] our version of the Essex disaster and the Mayflower will be the drive home from the mall in 2 inches of snow.” The more truly difficult our circumstances the harder it can become to hold on to our patience and perseverance - that is true for us, it was also true for John the Baptist.

Reading through the Gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist exits the stage after being arrested in chapter 4:12 and is not mentioned again until chapter 11. John was arrested and thrown in prison because he had the courage to tell Herod the ruler of the region that it was wrong for him to take his brother’s wife. Herod didn’t appreciate the criticism so he locked John up in the dungeon of the fortress of Machaerus in the mountains near the Dead Sea. Just as the prophet Elijah had opposed King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, John had spoken out against Herod Antipas and Herodias. This is one of the ways Matthew points out that John is the forerunner of the Messiah. Jesus says so in Matthew 11. This is important because the Jews believed Elijah must arrive first to prepare the way for God’s Anointed.

For a man like John who had spent considerable time and had his spiritual vision and understanding shaped in the open spaces of the wilderness, the confinement, darkness, filth and stench of the prison must have been agonizing. With little to do but think and reflect on his life which might end at any moment, we can understand that John might be wrestling with what he had done and said. We can easily imagine him struggling with depression and doubt and pondering if it was worth it. Jesus was not exactly fitting the profile John had of the mighty one who would burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Who is Jesus anyway, he might have wondered. Had John begun to question whether he had seen the real Messiah? Or was John with characteristic humility, seeking to help his despondent followers to see that Jesus was actually the Christ of God and not John himself.

John was a charismatic and impressive individual. He had attracted quite a following and through many centuries there were those who would continue to be

devoted to him. John had seen Jesus at his baptism. Now he would like confirmation that Jesus is who John thought he was. Listen to the Gospel of Matthew 11:2-6:

“When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them,

“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.”

The important thing to understand here is Jesus’ answer to John’s question and our answer to John’s question. John’s question reflects the positive and the negative responses people had to Jesus – Are you the one who is to come – Yes, I think so! Shall we wait for another – sigh, it seems like we have to. The greatness of Jesus is seen in his response. Jesus doesn’t seem the least bit offended by John’s question. He doesn’t get mad or arrogantly demonstrate his credentials, power, or authority. He doesn’t say, “Of course, I am the Messiah, what do you think?” Jesus’ response is indirect he points to his words and his deeds rather than a title or a confession of his identity. He says, his words and deeds reveal who he is. “Look around and report back to John what you hear and see…” Part of us wishes Jesus had just said to John’s disciples, “Let there be no mistake, I am the one and only Messiah of God.” But his answer is “Go and tell John what you hear and see.”

Have you ever used your imagination for a little bit to consider what it must have been like around Jesus – the ecstatic shouts of the blind who could now see the color of a piece of fruit or the light sparkling in the eyes of a friend, the deaf who were screaming and shouting and whispering just to hear the sound of their own voice and then falling silent to listen to the sounds of birds, the wind, and the voices of their loved ones. Did Jesus want John’s disciples to tell him about the dances and running and jumping being performed by those who had been lame and weak? Did Jesus want John to know of the awestruck joy of the dead who were raised and how their loved ones wept and cried with disbelief? Maybe Jesus wanted John to know that in the eyes of God the poor are never forgotten or despised.

Around Jesus there must have been an incredible and stunning array of sights and sounds to amaze anyone who witnessed them. It’s almost as if Jesus is saying,
“See what I have done for others. What could I do for you?” Then Jesus says one of his least known beatitudes, “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Why would anyone be offended by Jesus – on the surface that seems puzzling, but if Jesus is who his words and deeds seem to indicate he is – then his power and his words are life altering and to some threatening. Jesus wasn’t crucified on a cross like a common criminal because he was a moral teacher who had a way with words and told good stories. It was the power that Jesus displayed that made him so threatening.

Each of us has to answer John’s question about Jesus – do you think he is the one who is to come or are we still waiting for someone else. When John asks, “Should we wait for another?” interestingly, Matthew and Luke use different Greek words for “another” (heteros vs allos). Matthew’s usage but not Luke’s can also mean, “one of a different kind.” John’s question is not just if Jesus is the one, but should we wait for a different kind of Messiah, maybe because the acts of compassion and healing were not what John expected as much as fiery judgment. Maybe John has to adjust his expectation because God is acting in Jesus in ways John hadn’t anticipated. Matthew uses the same word again in 11:16 where Jesus replies to the people who are so quick to criticize himself and John the Baptist. 16 “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another (heteros), 17 ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; 19 the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’

Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

Jesus answered John’s question by pointing to what God was doing through him and telling John’s disciples to draw their own conclusions. As for our answer, if we follow Jesus’ example, we will not so much say that we believe in Jesus as we will invite people to reach their own conclusion when they hear and see what we do. God’s wisdom is vindicated, the Lord says, by her deeds.

Perhaps Jesus wasn’t exactly what John thought the Messiah would be, but Jesus was fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah 29, 35, and 61. Jesus’ reply is a way of saying, “This is the time of fulfillment prophesied by Isaiah.”
Isaiah had said 52:7, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

We have the opportunity today to be the messengers who bring good news to others. We are the ones who can go and tell John and everyone else we know that Christmas is the celebration of the birthday of the One who came to show us a God of love. We might say today:

How beautiful are the feet of those who walk the extra step across a room to greet someone with whom they have had differences.

How beautiful are the feet of those who step beyond the material gifts and appreciate the heart of the giver.

How beautiful are the feet of those who move about in the kitchen making the special foods and serving the guests who gather.

How beautiful are the feet of those who not only go church services but who also fully participate by greeting others joyfully, praying and singing heartily.

How beautiful are the feet of those who walk into homeless shelters and service agencies or places with little comfort to bring some of their own abundance.

How beautiful are the feet of those who visit others or go caroling to the lonely, the sick, and those who feel forgotten by the world.

How beautiful are the feet of those who help their neighbors.

How beautiful are all those feet that walk with God’s good news, with the intention of love in their hearts, for they are living the message of Jesus who came so long ago.

Who is Jesus, he is the One the world has been waiting and longing for.

The Christ of abundant love, born so long ago, lives on in us, if we let him.

As our feet take us near and far, let us continue to be the Christ to one another and let us live our lives so that we have something good we can go and tell John.

**Blessing:** Colossians 1:11-12

“May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints of light.”