

**Sermon: What Do You Think?**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Exodus 17:1-7; Matthew 21:23-32**

In the 1933 movie *Duck Soup*, Chico Marx, playing a character named Chicolini, said at one point, “Who ya gonna believe? Me, or your own eyes?”

Now, most people think Groucho said it, but a version of that line has evolved over time from an early 1900s song lyric. In 1948 the then-influential syndicated advice giver Dorothy Dix used the phrase “lying eyes” while referring to a situation of love and self-deception.<sup>1</sup> After a while, the two quotes started getting tangled up with one another.

Wanting proof about anything is an age-old concern, as today’s two readings make clear.

In the Gospel reading, it’s the chief priests and elders of the people causing the trouble.

In terms of the church year, we are far from Easter and about two months away from Advent, but here we are, dropped into the middle of Jesus’ final week in Jerusalem. And people are still questioning his authority. Resistance to Jesus never seems to end.

To get some context, we have to back up a little, of course. Jesus rode into town just a few days ago, with the people shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (21:9). They said, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee” (21:11).

Then there was that incident with the money changers in the Temple. That didn’t go over well. Then he healed the blind and the lame who came *to him*, again in the Temple. And when some children in the Temple cried out “Hosanna to the Son of David,” the chief priests and elders became angry. Jesus was directly challenging *their* authority, in the Temple no less, and they didn’t like it.

Jesus left and spent the night in Bethany. Now it’s the next day and the chief priests and elders are back, this time with a loaded question: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (21:23)

Jesus could very well have answered, “My own,” but he’s smarter than that.

Rather than answer, he posed a question of his own. The chief priests and elders split the difference by answering, “We don’t know.” If they had been paying attention, they would have known, of course, but saying so would have put them in a bad position which is not what they set out to do. It was Jesus they wanted to trap, not vice-versa.

It's a similar situation in the Exodus reading, except the people are not trying to trap Moses. Their short-sightedness and their immediate need for water is making them – again – test the Lord, and it’s driving Moses to distraction. The people keep forgetting why they were in Egypt, and why they left there, and who it was that made that happen. But overwhelming thirst will cloud your thinking.

Ever hear of dowsers? Dowsing refers to the practice of using a forked stick or similar device to locate underground water, mainly, and has been around for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. It’s a pseudoscience at best.

The truth is that in many areas around the world, in regions of adequate rainfall, underground water is so prevalent close to the land surface that it would be hard to drill a well and *not* find water. But if you want to know depth, quantity, and quality, then you need to rely on real science.<sup>2</sup>

In the wilderness of Sin thousands of years ago, things looked pretty bleak in terms of finding water anywhere. Search the internet and you’ll find that there are plenty of ways to find water in the desert. Moses didn’t have that option. But God led him to a place where it was apparently possible to knock the rocks out of the way to reveal a hidden spring or ground water of some kind. Moses did as he was told and saved the day.

What would we have done in his place? We might reasonably wonder why such miracles seldom happen around here today. Or are we more impatient than the Israelites?

The very next scene in Exodus describes an ‘unmotivated attack’ by the Amalekites. The Israelites found water and presumably the Amalekites wanted it. Israel wins, but only with God’s help. That should have answered their question about whether or not the Lord was with them. Again.

Their lack of belief in what they had seen with their own eyes is tested every day, and every day, God responds, patiently, inventively, lovingly. Moses seems to be the only one rattled by his people’s forgetful behavior.

The Book of Exodus gives us example after example of God being among the people, guiding them, providing for them, and fighting for them.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus had plenty to say about the subject of authority, and effortlessly slides into telling a parable about two sons to illustrate his point.

By asking the chief priests and elders, ‘What do *you* think’ about the parable, Jesus puts them in a position where they *have* to answer. He frames the parable around John the Baptist, a prophet they didn’t believe; nor did they repent when they saw the truth about John. Imagine how they reacted when Jesus told them – society’s best – that the tax collectors and prostitutes – allegedly the worst and the lowest – will go into the kingdom of God ahead of them because of their repentant response to John.

In their arrogance, the chief priests and elders made neither the commitment to change nor did they feel they had any work to do in the first place. Despite their professed allegiance to God, they have shown no allegiance to *doing God’s will*. In that sense, which of the parable’s two sons do they resemble most?

Matthew wants us to ask the same question about ourselves.

Matthew’s Gospel persistently confronts us with the issue of Jesus’ identity, and Jesus persists in his mission to draw people to him through repentance and reconciliation, to gather in the people of God to one community of faith, to rescue one sheep at a time if necessary.

If we apply our faith to our problems, as Exodus shows us, we can interpret the scene in the wilderness to mean there is no such thing as an impossible situation. With God’s help we might find our way out. ‘If you get to the end of the road, turn right,’ as they say – and if you turn with faith and perseverance, there you will find God.

God does not promise to give us what we want, like good grades or a million dollars. God asks us to trust. God asks us what we think about God every day. We’re asked to choose God. Many happy surprises await those who love God and choose well.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 1948 March 10, *The Daily Argus-Leader*, “Should Mother of 3 Wed?” by Dorothy Dix, Quote Page 17, Column 1, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.usgs.gov/special-topic/water-science-school/science/water-dowsing>, accessed 24 September 2020.