Confidence can be a fragile gift. Confidence is a come and go affair. John the Baptist is in jail and he has heard some gossip about Jesus and it has cost him his confidence. Isn’t it amazing how fragile confidence can be? A few words, a bit of gossip, one bad review and people can fall apart.

Before John was arrested, he was a very confident preacher. In fact, he wasn’t just any preacher; he was the one sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. He preached up a storm, baptized more people than a mega-church pastor, and told everyone within shouting distance that Jesus was the One: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Those are the words of a confident preacher.

And now the one he thought was the one seems to be less than advertised. One of the Pseudepigrapha (I love to say that word – pseudepigrapha), the Psalms of Solomon is a group of eighteen psalms. The 17th of the 18 Psalms pictures the Messiah as a military, political king like David. John may have been influenced by this messianic strain. There’s an interesting book, Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era, that makes the historical argument that there was no uniform or even dominant idea of the Messiah in first-century Judaism. If we miss our history lesson, there’s no telling what kind of mythology we will imbibe. We will start believing that Santa Claus and Jesus were white.

What we have is Jesus reinterpreting the messianic expectations. Matthew and Luke have the story of John’s questioning of the Messiah motif; Mark and John don’t have such a scene. John has John the Baptist say, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” – not exactly a military metaphor. John expected Jesus to be the new Judas Maccabbee and instead he’s the suffering servant and in case we missed it, in the gospels, Judas is not a conquering hero but a cowardly betrayer of the true Messiah. No wonder John the Baptist cries out, “Are you the one?” After all, Jesus was only one of several Messiahs of the day, some of them even
named in the New Testament along with the account of their demise. Having and keeping confidence challenges us all.

Little children have so much confidence and creativity. Sir Ken Robinson says, “When my son was four in England he was in the Nativity play. He got the part of Joseph. He didn’t have to speak, but you know the bit where the three kings come in. They come in bearing gifts, and they bring gold, frankincense and myrrh. We were sitting there and the little kings just went out of sequence. The first boy said, ‘I bring you gold.’ And the second boy said, ‘I bring you myrrh.’ And the third boy said, ‘Frank sent this.’”

Kids will have a go. They are not frightened by being wrong. Then something happens to all this creativity. Picasso said that all children are born to be artists but we grow out of it. There’s a Grinch that steals our creativity as we get older. And the Grinch is our culture, our educational system, our churches. We teach this fear of criticism and this fear of being wrong. We are educated out of creativity, Sir Robinson says. Isn’t it tragic how much damage we inflict? Jonas Salk said, “If all the insects were to disappear from the earth, within 50 years all life on earth would disappear. If all human beings were to disappear from the earth, within 50 years all forms of life would flourish.” Oh that we could learn here to do no harm.

I bet a lot of us have our own horror stories of how someone killed our confidence. As a teenager, a girl broke up with me because she said, “You have the worst laugh; you laugh like a hyena.” I didn’t laugh again for six months. A third grader named Brian was making a horse out of clay. And at one point, one of the girls leaned over and said to him, “That’s terrible. That doesn’t look anything like a horse.” And Brian’s shoulders sank. And he wadded up the clay horse and he threw it back in the bin and he never did a project like that ever again. People can make a wreck of the confidence of others with just a few harsh words: “You’ll never amount to anything.” “You are not smart.” The church has done a lot of damage using shame and guilt over the centuries.

The psychologist Albert Bandura, of Stanford, works with people with phobias. He guides people through incremental steps until they are no longer afraid. He tells his client there is a snake in the next room, and that
they are going in there. Most of them replied, “No, I’m not going in there with a snake.” He gets a person comfortable looking at the snake from another room and then from a two-way mirror and then with the door open and many more baby steps later, he’s in the room and eventually touches the snake – while wearing welder’s gloves. And when he touches the snake he is cured. Bandura calls this “guided mastery.” And get this: freedom from one phobia translates to other phobias. The people who went through this process ended up having less anxiety about other things in their lives. They tried harder, persevered longer, and were more resilient in the face of failure. They gained a new confidence. Bandura calls this confidence “self-efficacy” – the sense that you can change the world and that you can attain what you set out to do.

I just read The Art of Fielding, a baseball book Nancy Soloski suggested to me. It’s the story of a college baseball player who may be the best shortstop ever. He is on the verge of breaking the all-time record of games played without making an error and in that game, he makes a throwing error. He throws the ball over the outstretched mitt of the first baseman and hits a teammate in the face. The rest of the book is about the struggle to regain lost confidence.

When our expectations are derailed, our confidence takes a dip, falling faster than the stock market on Black Monday. Loss of confidence leads to doubts and harsh questions: “Are you the one?” “Jesus, are you for real?” “Is this all there is?” “Are we going to see some real action?” “Where’s the unquenchable fire?” “Jesus, you came to set the prisoners free. Now, would be a good time to get me out of Herod’s jail.”

Of all things, Jesus is not hard on John. He doesn’t send John a judgment on his lack of faith. I think we are too hard on one another. We go after people when they disagree with us or when they are less than perfect and we have no idea that life for them may be a lot harder than it is for us. Jesus is not hard on John.

What does Jesus say? “Go tell John what you hear and see.” What is John to 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.” Disability, sickness, alienation, and death – every threat
to life is swallowed up in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This doesn’t mean we will escape disability, sickness, alienation, and death. It means that in all of these things, we will not be separated from the love of God, not be abandoned by God.

And neither does Jesus leave people with this rather dubious picture of a doubting, scared John stuck in Herod’s hole-in-the-wall jail. Jesus praises John the Baptist as a brave, courageous preacher – not a reed shivering in the wind, but a rock standing against the storms. He is not a soft, weak, scared preacher who says what people like to hear. “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Isn’t that just like Jesus? Something for us as well – “the least” are to have all the confidence in the world in Jesus. The world’s expectations of our rank, status, and success count for zero. What counts is that Jesus believes in us. So even if it hasn’t turned out like you thought – not the CEO, president, top gun, number one, head of the class – don’t let expectations hurt your confidence.

Doug Dietz designed MRI machines for GE. One day he’s at a hospital, checking out one of his MRI machines and he sees a little girl and she was crying and terrified. He was disappointed to learn that 80% of the pediatric patients in that hospital had to be sedated in order to deal with his MRI machine. He was hurt and disappointed that his life-saving machine caused so much fear in children.

He redesigned the experience of the MRI scan. He painted the walls and the machine, and he got the operators retrained by people who work at children’s museums. And now when the kid comes, it’s an experience. They tell the children, “You are going into a pirate ship, and it will move and be noisy, but don’t move because we don’t want the pirates to find you.” The results: now only 10% of children have to be sedated. When he was back at the hospital later, checking on his new process, one little girl came out of her MRI scan, ran up to her mother and said, “Mommy, can we come back tomorrow?”

Now, that’s confidence! And I really believe when you keep coming back here that your confidence to take on the traumas of life will get stronger. With restored confidence we can work on things that are really
important. We can go in new directions. We can come up with more interesting, better ideas about how we can be in mission in our community, how we can be a more vibrant and confident church. Confidence is available here and you are welcome to have as much of it as you want! Look at be saved! Amen.

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