

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

December 11, 2022

*III Advent, Matthew 11:2-11*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Even when the content proves difficult to hear, the messages of Jesus and John usually follow a simple form: **not that, but this**. In a related structure, today's sermon will alternate between a relevant illustration and an exegesis of this week's assigned Gospel, without directive stitching between the two – ginning a little mystery about where we are going and making room for *your* ideas and connections. As the sermon reaches its conclusions, we will consider our options for what meaning we have made; offer a **not-that-but-this** claim worth carrying out the door; and then discover what happens when we sew together the seemingly clashing threads.

*Here is the relevant illustration:*

One fall evening three decades ago,<sup>i</sup> MTV traded Jon Bon Jovi's Aqua-Net and neon spandex for the unwashed tangle and angsty flannel of a three-piece band from Aberdeen, Washington [that sentence likely includes the Trinity Church pulpit debut of several vocabulary words]. That swap arrived with a speed and cultural force recalling The Beatles' "Love Me Do," the opening report of the British Invasion some thirty years before. The David Geffen Company released Nirvana's second album, *Nevermind*, on September 24, 1991, just one week after Guns N' Roses' long-awaited *Use Your Illusion* albums finally hit store shelves.<sup>ii</sup> Though *Use Your Illusion[s] I and II* sold as many as 500,000 copies<sup>iii</sup> in their first two hours on the market (as one clear locator of this moment in time, those sales included more cassettes than any other format), by Christmas, *Nevermind's* opening track – the anthemic "Smells Like Teen Spirit" – had overwhelmed GNR and all comers, forever<sup>iv</sup> altering the trajectory of Top-40 radio.

That winter, the suburban kids of my Louisiana hometown started dressing like Shreveport had been annexed as a village of the Pacific Northwest. Like many, I found myself caught at a perilous intersection with fast-moving social traffic heading in opposing directions. To clarify one's identity, a savvy teen had to choose their allegiance, associating either with the emerging Grunge culture and its cousins in socially conscious rap,<sup>v</sup> or staying loyal to the less demanding establishment acts. An entire moral economy built up around these affinities,<sup>vi</sup> and as a deeply committed devotee of both punk(ish) noise<sup>vii</sup> and the fretboard flair of glam, I longed for a via media, a *Metal* way [See what I did there? Instead of "middle," I said "Metal," which is a genre of loud music ...].

Nirvana also faced a crossroads, one from their side of the stage. By January of 1992, *Nevermind* was selling 300,000 copies *every week*, and the band's membership had become globally recognized superstars. As the threesome began to consider a follow-up album, they realized they could either emphasize their peculiarities and further their anti-commercial inclinations, or they could smooth their rougher edges and turn their popularity into cash. While becoming one of the cookie-cutter bands they had displaced on the FM dial would inevitably prove more profitable, "selling out" would, of course, cost them their rock-n-roll soul.

Into that confessional booth, record producer and authenticity evangelist<sup>viii</sup> Steve Albini sat down at his Illinois studio's typewriter, and hammered out a letter, pitching his services to Nirvana.

*Here is the exegesis:*

After last week's scene<sup>ix</sup> of John preaching repentance at the Jordan riverside, Jesus approaches the wild man for baptism.<sup>x</sup> The concluding verses of Chapter 3 reveal that "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus [answered], 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.'"<sup>xi</sup> John "consents," and he baptizes Jesus.<sup>xii</sup>

Following his baptism, remember that Jesus "was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."<sup>xiii</sup> Despite the assaults, Jesus overcomes Satan's lures, and the angels wait on him as he fulfills his fast<sup>xiv</sup> – a fast lasting long enough that the surrounding sociopolitical climate had intensified while he was away.<sup>xv</sup> When Jesus emerges from the woods, he learns that John has been arrested. Matthew 4:12 reports, "When Jesus heard [this, the Lord] withdrew to Galilee." Despite this withdrawal, Jesus is not running away; he does not retreat from the challenging message that, presumably, got John into trouble in the first place. Instead, Matthew 4:17 confirms, "From that time Jesus began to proclaim [John's message:] 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

In today's appointment, John – still in prison – hears "what the Messiah [is] doing." Other than a passing, Chapter 9 reference to John's followers,<sup>xvi</sup> this is the first time we have encountered John since that earlier word of his arrest.

These parallel "hearings" – Jesus' *hearing* of John's imprisonment back in Chapter 4, and John's *hearing* of Jesus' ministry in Chapter 11 – amplify the distances between the two men. Unlike the tale of Zechariah and Elizabeth that begins the Gospel of Luke,<sup>xvii</sup> Matthew opens with a genealogy of Jesus.<sup>xviii</sup> Realize, then, Matthew's narrative offers no testimony to the baby leaping in Elizabeth's womb or her pregnant cousin Mary's "Magnificat."<sup>xix</sup> While in Luke *family* binds Jesus and John, in Matthew, *prophecy* binds the two.

... and back to the illustration:

Four years before *Nevermind* crashed the Billboard charts, Steve Albini recorded the sophomore effort of Boston's "Alternative" pioneers, The Pixies [what a great band!].<sup>xx</sup> With that album – 1988's, *Surfer Rosa* – Albini forged an enduring identity as a producer. Almost thirty years ago to this day,<sup>xxi</sup> he typed his letter to Nirvana:<sup>xxii</sup>

[Dear] Kurt, Dave, and Chris:

... Most contemporary engineers and producers see a record as a 'project,' and the band as only one element of the project. Further, they consider the recordings to be a [curated] layering of specific sounds, each of which is under complete control [of the producer] from the moment the note is conceived through the final mix ... My approach is exactly the opposite.

I consider the band the most important [element in the whole process], as the creative entity [giving rise to its own personality and style, as well as] the social entity that exists 24 hours out of each day. I do not consider it my place to tell you what to do or how to play. I'm quite willing to let my opinions be heard (If I think the band is making beautiful progress or a heaving mistake, I [do] consider it part of my job to tell them), but ... I like to leave room for accidents and chaos.

... I prefer to work on records that aspire to greater things, like originality, personality, and enthusiasm ... [and i]f you will come commit yourselves to [these as the foundational tenets of the recording process, then I would love to be involved with you].

Making his case for the production gig, Albini (rightly) argued that the corporate-controlled music industry prefers to regurgitate the most profitable sounds. Rather than recording a band as they actually are – especially if they look and sound novel – “front-office bulletheads” (as Albini called them)<sup>xxiii</sup> want to reshape every band to fit what is selling best in any given moment.<sup>xxiv</sup> And, in that early winter of 1992, major labels wanted every guitar tone to mimic Kurt Cobain's Fender Mustang<sup>xxv</sup> ... which set Nirvana in an odd predicament: *If we sound like we did on our last album, are we being our authentic best, or are we selling out?*

...and back to the exegesis:

John sends his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”<sup>xxvi</sup> At one level, of course, John asks whether Israel's waiting has finally reached its fulfillment – if Jesus is the promised Christ about whom John prophesied at the Jordan. But he also asks more than that. Maybe John grew up in a Southern home, because he seems to believe that asking for exactly what he needs would be rude [that's self-effacing humor]: John wants Jesus to lead an insurrection that breaks him out of prison!<sup>xxvii</sup>

*Hey, man, are you Messiah enough to bust me out of here, or are you not?  
Are you the one who is to come – as in, coming to get me – or am I stuck in this joint?*

For his part, Jesus understands John at both levels. He instructs the Baptist's followers to go and tell John what they "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."<sup>xxxviii</sup> That is, "take no offense at me,"<sup>xxxix</sup> but I'm not that kind of Messiah ... and I'm not coming to get you.

Despite this, Jesus wants the crowds to be clear that his decision against mounting [an AC/DC<sup>xxx</sup>- or Thin-Lizzy<sup>xxxi</sup>-styled] *Jailbreak* is not a judgement of John. Jesus declares, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist."<sup>xxxii</sup> See Jesus' decision is not about who John is, but about who Jesus is. Therefore, the same principles of humility governing Jesus' behavior also conform Jesus' idea of John's status (of everyone's status), prompting the final pronouncement, "yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than him."<sup>xxxiii</sup>

*So, having pulled these two threads to a roughly equal length, this sermon form now wants us to hem a tidy **not-that-but-this** conclusion. Here are two options:*

In one bit of homiletical embroidery, we can tighten the Nirvana illustration and point to the band's 1994, Albini-stewarded release as a perfected example of staying true to one's identity, of not selling out ... you know, Nirvana like John the Baptist and Jesus [that's a joke; see, it's funny because Nirvana really wasn't at all like either John the Baptist or Jesus]. But Nirvana's self-righteousness felt performative even then, and while the album they recorded turned out fine, I do not believe anyone's rock-n-roll or Christian salvation can be set upon it.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

One the other hand, we could tug the scriptural thread and tie together the prophetic gifts of John and Jesus, remembering it's in Matthew that Herod serves John's head on a platter.<sup>xxxv</sup> In this pulpit stitchery, we propose that both prophets knew what was coming for themselves, and they accepted their fates without either reluctance or remainder, modeling the perfected fidelity we should aspire. But the text tells a different story – John *does* flinch, and if Jesus does not fully recoil, he certainly grieves the inevitability of his death as it approaches.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

No, I believe our **not-that-but-this** claim worth carrying out the door cautions us against preferring a false God who fixes, rather than the faithful God who accompanies. See, whatever heroism Nirvana could deliver to the culture would have been what any of us can offer – their unaffected selves – shared in settings as intimate as an earphone and contributed without contriving for any specific outcome.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Likewise, while John wants a problem-solving Messiah, Jesus instead offers love and understanding. In this reading, the prophets' mortal reluctances enrich their connections to one another and with us who inherit their faith.

*Finally, we sew together the sermon's seemingly clashing threads and stretch that new fabric:*

Returning to Albin's letter, let us revoice it as an epistle from the Christ who has come very near [insert here a punchline about serving Albin's ego by suggesting his is the voice of God!]. Imagine the High and Holy One hammering away on heaven's Hermes 3000, nurturing our collective stewardship of Beloved Community and pitching the good Lord's services:

Dear Trinity Church,

... Most contemporary engineers and producers see Church as a 'project,' and each of you as only one element of it, all under complete control of the Creator from the conceptual moment through the final mix ... My approach is exactly the opposite.

I consider you the most important element in the whole process of being Beloved Community, as the creative collective giving rise to the personality and style of Trinity Church within these walls, as well as that social entity existing beyond Copley Square. I do not consider it my place to tell you what to do or how to play. I'm quite willing to let my opinions be heard (If I think you are making beautiful progress or a heaving mistake, I do consider it part of my job to tell you), but ... I like to leave room for accidents and even a little chaos.

... I prefer to work with congregations that aspire to greater things, like originality, personality, and enthusiasm ... and if you will come commit yourselves to these as the foundational tenets of building Beloved Community, then I would love to be involved with you.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

That we would join in this companioning work of Beloved Community,  
I pray with gladness and singleness of heart;  
*Amen.*

---

<sup>i</sup> In "Self-Destructive Zones" – from the Drive-By Truckers' 2008 album, *Brighter Than Creation's Dark* – Mike Cooley recalls the suddenness of that moment when Seattle's grunge overtook the FM dial:

It was 1990 (give or take, I don't remember)  
when the news of revolution hit the air.  
The girls hadn't even started taking down their posters  
when the boys start cutting off their hair.  
The radio stations all decided angst was finally old enough  
it ought to have a proper home.

And dead, fat, or rich,  
nobody's left to [snitch]  
about the goings-on in self-destructive zones.

Cooley (a genius) recognized this transition as generational, as much as cultural, and he rightly judged both the naïve pride of teenagers and the silliness of some glam, including the latter's affinity for knockoff, Flying V guitars:

Caught between a generation dying from its habits

---

and another thinking rock-n-roll was new,  
the pawn shops were packed like a backstage party  
hanging full of ugly, pointy, cheap guitars.  
The young'uns all turned to karaoke,  
hanging all their wishes upon disregarded stars.

<sup>ii</sup> Had GNR released these albums one year earlier, they would have sold exponentially more records. As it came to pass, Axl Rose became the “self-destructive zone” counterweight to the more righteous Kurt Cobain.

<sup>iii</sup> Including my copies, purchased on CD at the Hastings in South Park Mall.

<sup>iv</sup> “[Forever ... and that's a mighty long time.](#)” I can acknowledge that formulaic bands like Slaughter and Steelheart justifiably ended the 80s-Metal era, but I quickly got my fill of smugly-sweated, grunge cookie-cutters. And while I can still go back and find enough joy in Van Halen (\*not\* Van Hagar) to fill my ears, heart, and maybe the whole cosmos, I have zero appetite for the grunge wannabes and their overproduced sound that defined the 1990s ... and if I *really* wanted to go full “Get Off My Lawn!”, I would argue that the corporate “bulletheads” chasing Nirvana’s success sent popular music careening into the myopic, autotuned wasteland that now fill most of The Spotifys [here endeth the rant].

<sup>v</sup> The grunge-metal and politically charged rap crowds of 1991 found overlap with one another. Public Enemy’s *Apocalypse 91 ... The Enemy Strikes Black* included the remix “Bring Tha Noize” with Anthrax, and Lollapalooza acts from that year included Ice T’s metal band, Body Count.

<sup>vi</sup> Returning to the idea of GNR and Nirvana providing the point/counterpoint of that cultural moment, the *Use Your Illusion* albums became symbols of the self-satisfying bloat (and misogyny, and hedonism, and ...) in popular 80s-Metal acts.

<sup>vii</sup> The SST and Twin Tone labels, specifically.

<sup>viii</sup> Of a sort.

<sup>ix</sup> Matthew 3:1-11.

<sup>x</sup> Matthew 3:13.

<sup>xi</sup> Matthew 3:14-15a.

<sup>xii</sup> Matthew 15b-17.

<sup>xiii</sup> Matthew 4:1.

<sup>xiv</sup> Matthew 4:2-11.

<sup>xv</sup> The verse 2 description of “forty days and forty nights” serving as a stand-in for “a good, long while.”

<sup>xvi</sup> Matthew 9:14. “Then the disciples of John came to him, saying ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?’”

<sup>xvii</sup> Luke 1:5-25.

<sup>xviii</sup> Matthew 1:1-17. The genealogy appeals to the Jewish and Jewish-Christian communities Matthew aims to reach.

<sup>xix</sup> Luke 1:39-56.

<sup>xx</sup> I didn’t find The Pixies until 1989’s *Doolittle*, but I wore the writing off that clear cassette.

<sup>xxi</sup> Dated November 17, 1992.

<sup>xxii</sup> Albini’s letter is the genesis of this sermon. This fall I bought a used copy of the 20-year anniversary reissue of Nirvana’s *In Utero*. The edition featured a hardcover book that includes a full-size copy of the four-page epistle.

<sup>xxiii</sup> “I think the very best thing you could do at this point is exactly what you are talking about doing: band a record out in a couple of days, with high quality but minimal ‘production’ and no interference from the front office bulletheads ... If, instead, you might find yourselves in the position of being temporarily indulged by the record company, only to have them yank the chain at some point (hassling you to rework songs/sequences/production, calling-in hired guns to ‘sweeten’ your record, turning the whole thing over to some remix jockey, whatever) then you’re in for a bumner and I want no part of it.”

---

<sup>xxiv</sup> More specifically, this sermon started in response to a related paragraph from Albini’s letter: “I do not consider recording and mixing to be unrelated tasks which can be performed by specialists with no continuous involvement [of the band]. 99 percent of the sound of a record should be established while the basic take is recorded. Your experiences are specific to your records; but in my experience, remixing has never solved any problems that actually existed, only imaginary ones.” That is, the “problem” remixing an album solves is that the recorded bass drum doesn’t sound like the Bass Drum Sound popular in that moment of time. Part of what I admire so much about Albini’s philosophy is his commitment to record a band as they are and sound, for better or worse. Albini wants to capture the idiosyncrasies – even errors – rather than normalize or eliminate them. As someone might come to prefer the taste of artificial sweetener over sugar because they eat so many over-processed foods, our ears can come to prefer a generic Bass Drum Sound to the noises of an actual drum kit played by a human person. There’s still a sermon that more explicitly names and explores these dynamics ...

<sup>xxv</sup> ... [which recently sold for \\$4.5M.](#)

<sup>xxvi</sup> Matthew 11:2.

<sup>xxvii</sup> For the last 20 years, a cohort of seminary classmates and I have talked weekly (first by teleconference, now via Zoom) in an accountability group, offering support and exchanging ideas. For all but that first COVID fall, we have also met in person once each year, and we rendezvoused in Arkansas week-before-last. The Rev. Barkley Thompson, Rector of Saint Mark’s Episcopal Church in Little Rock, recently suggested to us that John wanted Jesus to break him out of prison.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Matthew 11:4-5.

<sup>xxix</sup> Matthew 11:6.

<sup>xxx</sup> “[Heartbeats! They were racing ... Freedom! He was chasing.](#)”

<sup>xxxi</sup> “[Tonight there’s gonna be a jailbreak somewhere in this town.](#)”

<sup>xxxii</sup> Matthew 11:11a.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Matthew 11:11b.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> I don’t recall if I ever owned *In Utero* ca. 1994, but, from this side of Cobain’s suicide, the “All alone is all we are” outro in “All Apologies” is a haunting and painful portent.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Matthew 14:1-12.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Matthew 26:38. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus “took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.’ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’”

<sup>xxxvii</sup> While Nirvana’s early energies may have been more sincere, they likely did not start a punk band to keep from being heard. In any case, by the time of their second major-label album, the market had done what the market does, coopting whatever authenticity the three of them brought and absolutely commodifying it. Therefore, the either-or Albini presented to them in his letter was mostly a false choice.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> I intended to conclude the sermon by referring back to the “predicament” I referenced for Nirvana – *If we sound like we did on our last album, are we being our authentic best, or are we selling out?* – with a challenge to our tendency to prefer the Trinity Church of precious memory – whatever preciousness and whatever memory someone might most treasure. As it came to pass, however, landing on the question sounded more sharply critical than I intended it to be. Even so, I believe God does hope to partner us *as we are and as we are becoming*, not as we were or as we idyllically remember ourselves as having been.