

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Now I could understand a knee jerk reaction to this reading being something like “really, *more* John the Baptist? We did that last week!” And we did, but last week we talked about him baptizing people in the Jordan River, declaring the kingdom of God to be at hand, that the one more powerful than him who will baptize them all with the Holy Spirit is coming, so get ready! And today we skip about 1/3 of the gospel of Matthew just to continue journeying with John.

And during that 1/3, Jesus does quite a lot of noteworthy feats—40 days of temptation in the wilderness, he delivers the Sermon on the Mount, calls the 12, yells at a storm until it calms down. And there’s also about a dozen specific stories of Jesus healing people and woven throughout these stories are ones where Jesus brings good news to the poor and oppressed. It is a busy time for Jesus.

But John has been busy too. Baptizing people in the Jordan for quite some time. Jesus goes to him to be baptized and John immediately and unhesitatingly recognizes him as the One to Come. Full of humility, at Jesus’ encouragement, John baptizes him. And a little bit of time passes.

And then Herod, the chief governor of the region did something quite scandalous. Herod married his brother’s wife, Herodias. Which maybe doesn’t sound *that* bad by today’s standards, but in that context marrying your dead brother’s widow was considered to be incestuous...but his brother *wasn’t dead*. And Herod didn’t care, he wanted her so he took her. And while it’s easy to paint her as a co-villain in this

situation, he's the chief governor and she's...just a woman, more property than person. There's a *massive* power imbalance here. I think it's safe to say that Herodias' situation was complicated. So Herod took her as his wife, even though her husband, his brother was still very much alive, and brought her to his court.

And John would not stay silent about this. He started loudly and publicly declaring that what Herod was doing wasn't right, that it wasn't lawful for him to keep her as a wife, and that he needed to return her to her husband at once. And, like many leaders to this day who are accused of law breaking and corruption, Herod didn't take kindly to this, and threw his detractor in prison. Herod wanted to kill him, but the Judean people recognized him as a prophet, and Herod worried killing him would result in an uprising. So John remained in prison for awhile while Herod tried to work out what to do with him.

And while he's in prison, John himself, prophet of the lord, the voice of one calling out in the wilderness, the *cousin* of the Messiah, starts to have doubts. He gave up *everything* he had to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God, and what does he have to show for it? A cold prison cell and, once Herod can figure out how to justify it politically (and he will) death. Was all that time in the wilderness, the camel hair shirts and diet of locusts and wild honey for nothing? Jesus certainly isn't acting the way he and the rest of the people thought the Messiah would. He isn't violently overthrowing the occupying military forces and liberating the people. Could John have been wrong this whole time? Is the kingdom of God still far off? Did he really just...waste his entire life? So John, unable to go to Jesus himself, sends some of his disciples to Jesus to ask him. Are you the one to come, or do we need to keep waiting?

And, in typical Jesus fashion, Jesus doesn't directly answer his question. Neither a yes or a no, but tell John what you've seen and heard, blind people can see, people who were paralyzed walk, leprosy is cleansed, Deaf people can hear, *the dead are raised*, and the poor have good news brought to them. John, you are well versed in scripture, did any of the prophets accomplish these sorts of feats? Well then you have your answer. And I can't decide, if I were in John's position, if I'd find this kind of answer more reassuring or frustrating. On the one hand, Jesus I'm scared and vulnerable, please just give me a straightforward answer, I *really* need it. But on the other...I don't *need* to just take his word for it, I can see through his actions what the answer is. And yes, in my moments of doubt, I would *love* if I could just hear God shouting out from the clouds "YES, I'M HERE, I LOVE YOU!" and...I've never had that moment. But I have had friends drop by unannounced, reassurance come from unexpected places, sunsets that take my breath away, been tenderly nuzzled by animals that are normally very aloof. And while admittedly less cut and dry than the clouds shouting, those sorts of demonstrations do still give me an answer. And I think for me it's reassuring that in this aspect, I'm no different than John. God made flesh answers the questions of the voice of one crying out in the wilderness the same way God answers mine. John didn't get a yes or a no, but...his question was answered.

But then Jesus goes even further and delivers one more Beatitude: "blessed is anyone who is not offended by me." Not "blessed is anyone who doesn't question me" or "blessed is anyone without doubt in me." Just blessed is anyone who is not offended. Because Jesus *isn't* acting the way they thought the Messiah would. This figure they'd been yearning for and had all these expectations about...Jesus is often deviating from the script that the people had written for him. Blessed is anyone

who isn't upset or resentful by that. Jesus is going to do what God sent him to do and...it's not what the people were hoping for then and...it's often not what we are hoping for in the here and now. Blessed are you if you don't interpret that as a personal insult.

And just in case someone in the crowd misunderstood and thought Jesus was upset with John, and was reprimanding him, Jesus addresses the crowd. What did you go out into that wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind—someone who changes their opinion this way and that and their convictions bend under pressure? Does that sound like John? No. Someone in grandiose clothes? Well people in finery live in palaces and John was out there in the wilderness wearing a tunic of camel hair so that can't be it. No you traveled all the way out there to see a prophet didn't you? Because that's who my cousin is, a prophet of the Lord. And Jesus...still isn't going to give the crowd an explicit and straightforward answer, a definitive yes or no if he's the Messiah. But he *does* confirm that John is the one who prepares the way for the Messiah, and *John* has testified that that person is Jesus, so...if and only if you are willing to listen to the prophet John's testimony...you have your answer.

Could Jesus have just said "yep, Messiah, that's me!" ? Oh absolutely! But it's almost like...evangelism is important or something. And I know, I know, to ELCA folks that often like a scary word and we really don't want to do it, and maybe like someone else could, is it *really* a priority? But...here is God made flesh and while he is completely capable of saying who he is...still he decides, for now at least, to let that role of testimony rely entirely on another. And yes that man is a prophet, and more than a prophet, the greatest person who had arisen thus far, because all the other prophets got to declare the kingdom of God was coming, but John got to

be the first to say “the kingdom is here!” And yet, the least in the kingdom of God will be greater than he. John is beheaded around 2 years before Jesus’ arrest. He never gets to witness the resurrection. He gets to preach the good news of God coming into the world but...the good news that on the third day God rose again? The good news of the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting? He wouldn’t live long enough to see those things realized. For this reason, though he was once the greatest, the least in the kingdom is greater than him. *You* are greater than him. And that’s not a jab against John! Just an acknowledgement that *you* have so much more to testify about than he did.

And I know, I know! “Vicar, that’s a...lot of pressure! *I’m* not nearly as important as *John the Baptist*! And what if I mess something up?” or “I have all these theological questions, so how could *I...*” And I’m here to tell you yes absolutely you are just as important to God and John the Baptist is. And you will for sure mess something up. That’s...just how being human works. It’s what you do after that that matters. You’ve got this. And as for having theological questions...well that just means you’re in good company.

Jesus tells the people that, if they are willing to accept it, John is Elijah. He doesn’t mean literally Elijah, but rather one filling the same role as him. And you know, Elijah did quite a number of marvelous feats that testified to God’s power and love. ...And even so, he fell into a period of deep depression and no longer has the strength to endure. So God sends an angel down to bring him food and water to eat and encourages him to rest. And then Elijah confronts God, laying his uncertainties before the LORD of hosts, and God listens to what Elijah has to say, and responds by bringing in more community to help him and support him.

Jesus says that John is Elijah, but he's not just Elijah in his moments of strength, John remains Elijah even in this moment of vulnerability. Neither John nor Elijah got reprimanded for being forthcoming about their uncertainties, they were both met with tenderness and pointed back to community. John is Elijah not *despite* his questioning, John is Elijah *including* the times he questions. And in so doing, he models, intentionally or not, how perfectly at ease God is with your questions and insecurities and impatience and doubts. It's not a failure, it's just part of a prophet's role. So keep bringing those questions to Jesus, and he'll keep answering them, though perhaps not in the manner you expected.

And rejoice, because you follow in the footsteps of this great prophet, and yet you get to go further still. Amen.