

## Lessons from John, Part Two

Last week we talked about three characteristics of John's ministry exemplified by the gospel, and I promised that we would continue the conversation today. Whereas last Sunday's text, with John preaching repentance to crowds in the middle of the wilderness, painted a picture of a thriving ministry, here we have a much darker image. John is in prison and far less confident than he was when we first meet him. His fate only becomes more bleak as Matthew's story unfolds: ultimately he is beheaded to appease Herodias, the king's wife.

If a week ago we pulled out continuity with the past, fruitfulness, and humility as lessons learned from John the Baptist, and deeply relevant to how we do God's work in the present moment, now we might identify doubt as the prevailing theme. Alone in a prison cell, John begins increasingly to doubt his call. First he questioned how he could be important enough to set the stage for, much less baptize, the Messiah. Doubt even precedes John's entrance into the world: he is a miracle baby, born to parents who believed they were too old to have children. John's anxiety intensifies with the days that pass with no word from Jesus and no indication of an escape from captivity. Perhaps Jesus was not the Savior after all. Perhaps John got it all wrong.

Some readers of this passage will eviscerate John for sending his students and followers to question Jesus, arguing that such a move indicates John's lack of faith. That interpretation, I think, lacks grace towards John. John is an ambiguous character in our scripture, doing both wonderful and not-so-wonderful things, behaving sometimes powerfully and courageously and other times meekly. We hold both in tension; Matthew does not attempt to reconcile these discrepancies. Like so many of the players in our Bible, John is profoundly human. One moment John prods Jesus to make claims about divinity, and the next moment Jesus praises John's clear, strong voice as God's messenger. John's faith and ministry is far from one-dimensional.

You may have heard before that the absence of doubt is not faith; rather, faith requires a commitment to keep believing and following and trusting,

but not to stop questioning. Questions and doubts make our faith deeper and able to stand the test of time and circumstances.

The “Dark Night of the Soul” is an expression often used to refer to a spiritual crisis or a profound episode of depression which derives from a poem by Saint John of the Cross and dates back to the sixth century. The poem does not glorify suffering, loneliness, and darkness, but it does recognize that dark precedes light, and that sometimes separation is necessary before union (and reunion) with God is made possible. No stanza makes the point better than this:

Oh, night that guided me,  
Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,  
Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover,  
Lover transformed in the Beloved!

John the Baptist endures his own dark night of the soul, and we are invited into his experience, for we too have had--or will have--seasons of fragile faith. God nonetheless holds us close, doubts and all.

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,

the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
"Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go  
astray.  
No lion shall be there,

nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

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The Song of Mary *Magnificat*

*Luke 1:46-55*

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; \*  
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.  
From this day all generations will call me blessed: \*  
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.  
He has mercy on those who fear him \*  
in every generation.  
He has shown the strength of his arm, \*  
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.  
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, \*  
and has lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things, \*  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, \*  
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,  
The promise he made to our fathers, \*  
to Abraham and his children for ever.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: \*  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. *Amen.*

#### James 5:7-10

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

#### Matthew 11:2-11

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."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way before you.'

"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."