

John the Baptist, June 24, 2018
Shepherd by the Sea Episcopal-Lutheran Church, Gualala, CA
Rev. Norman Theiss

Beloved of God:

It may seem that the church is taking us back to Advent at the beginning of summer by having us celebrate the day of John the Baptist this Sunday. But looking at him away from the setting of Advent might help us see him a bit more clearly.

The four writers of the Gospels make two points about John the Baptist emphatically and unmistakably. First they want us to know that he is not the Christ, the Messiah, that the Hebrew Scriptures talked about. They even tell us that John himself insisted that he was not the Christ. The second point they make is that John prepared the way for Christ. He prepared people for the coming of Christ into their hearts and into their world by calling on them to repent of their sins. And since the coming of Christ was revolutionary, the preparation for that coming had to be harsh and disrupting, and spared no one.

He told the most respected religious leaders of that time, the Pharisees and Sadducees:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

John did not spare the respected religious leaders and he did not spare the powerful. He told King Herod that it was not lawful for him to take his brother’s wife for himself. For that, Herod put John in prison and eventually at his wife’s insistence, had him beheaded.

John baptized Jesus, at Jesus’s insistence, and some of his disciples became disciples of Jesus. So the early church respected and honored John.

But a crucial story in the Gospels reveals that the early church made a clear distinction between John and Jesus. While John was languishing in Herod’s prison, he quite understandably had doubts about the good news Jesus was preaching. If repentance would bring on the kingdom of God, then surely he had repented and preached repentance. Why was God’s rule not working for him? Why was he in prison? He does not hide his doubts, but expresses them openly. He sends messengers to Jesus to ask him whether he is the Messiah they were expecting or should they look for someone else.

This is a moment that reveals John's humanity. This is where we can identify with John. He was not a rock of faith but a man in agony, struggling with doubt.

Whatever else Jesus may have said to comfort John, the Gospels give us and all who read them an answer that reveals the message that John apparently did not understand or preach. The message of the kingdom is not that if you repent, it will come, but that it comes wherever you see mercy. Jesus tells the messengers, "Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are brought good news. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (Matt. 11:4-6).

We do not read anywhere that John healed or was concerned with healing, or that he brought good news to the poor. John knew how to call for repentance, but not how to proclaim God's mercy. It seems likely then that the early church honored John as a martyr and a witness to Christ, but insisted over and over again and even in the words of John himself that he was not the Christ, that Jesus' message was higher and greater than John's message.

Notice the difference between the messages of John and Jesus. John called out to the people who came to hear him,

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Jesus's message was,

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Some of you may remember from the instructions you were given in the catechism that Christian teaching makes a critical distinction between law and gospel. The law tells us what God requires of us. It is the basis for civil order and it serves as a guide to the conscientious Christian. But the primary effect of the law is to accuse us of our failures, the wrongs we have done and the good we have failed to do. The gospel is the good news of what God has done for us, the redemption and forgiveness proclaimed to us in Christ. John rightly and powerfully laid down God's law, so that people would be ready to listen to Jesus's message of God's forgiveness and mercy. But John's call for repentance was not enough.

It is not enough to recognize evil; we need to recognize mercy. It is not enough to insist on law and order; we must insist on mercy. It is not enough to be right; we need to be merciful. Where do we see the coming of Christ among us? We see him when the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf

hear, the apparently dead come to new life, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended that the God of the universe is seen, not in bursts of wrath, but in such extreme bursts of mercy.