

2 Epiphany January 15, 2017

John the Baptist Again

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I don't know about you, and maybe I am just being crabby or impatient, but I am really tired of hearing about John the Baptist in our Gospel readings. Perhaps this mood is in part because of all the damp, wet, rainy, gray weather we've been having. But we've been hearing about this guy who hangs out at the river ever since Advent. Now the Season of Advent is behind us. Even the Christmas celebrations are done. Last week we celebrated Jesus' baptism and while it feels (at least to me) like we should be starting to hear our Sunday Gospel messages turn to Jesus' calling his disciples, today we have John the Baptist showing up and taking up at least half the Gospel reading once again today. What is it with this guy that makes the planners of the lectionary and the Gospel writers themselves so hesitant to move on from John the Baptist?

One of the things I deeply appreciate about the Episcopal Church following the Revised Common Lectionary is that it forces me to look closer and sometimes deeper at things I might not want to. It reminds me that Church and worship, isn't just about me, or what I want or feel like, because worship is larger than me and my preferences, just as the Gospel is about more than I or any scholar or commentator sees in them at any given time. In reality that makes the Church and the Revised Common Lectionary a lot like John the Baptist, who we saw today did a lot of pointing, exclaiming, and identifying away from himself toward not just someone but something larger than himself.

The truth is we Christians cannot have our faith without John the Baptist, as he plays an integral role in helping us see and understand who Jesus. No other Gospel showcases this role of John the Baptist more than John's Gospel, the one we just heard from. John's Gospel does not include Jesus' actual baptism, like the other Gospels do. Instead in John's Gospel we hear John testify or witness to what he experienced when Jesus was baptized and that is why he called Jesus the Lamb of God not once but twice. It might seem to some of us that in John's Gospel the author is making a noticeable effort to have John the Baptist intentionally and repeatedly point people away from him and toward Jesus. There is a reason for this perception.

Scholars have written that there were many different expectations for the Jewish Messiah. For some people, it was not Jesus who they believed was the Messiah, but John the Baptist. When you think about it, there were some similarities between John the Baptist and Jesus. Both had births that were announced by an angel. Both were arrested and died at the hands of the Roman government. Unlike Jesus, John the Baptist was arrested for speaking out directly against the behavior of Herod whose marriage John the Baptist considered to be wrong on many levels. His death in Herod's captivity was tragic and gruesome, and could easily be said to be a miscarriage of justice.

But there were other significant differences too. John the Baptist pretty much stayed in one place, out in the wilderness, doing what he did best: baptizing as a form of repentance, to offer the opportunity to wash people clean so they could grow closer to God and each other. It could be interpreted that he turned people away whom he didn't deem worthy or sincere, especially the Pharisees who came out to the river. John's fiery preaching gained him many followers and disciples who stayed with him and followed him even after he died. To this day there are remains a small remnant of people who still follow John the Baptist, convinced that he is the messiah.

Jesus, however, did not stay at the river's edge. He traveled with his disciples, meeting people where they were, healing, preaching, listening, restoring life, storytelling or telling parables, sharing meals even with religious leaders like Nicodemus and social outcasts too. While there are accounts of towns or villages where Jesus was rejected, we do not hear of Jesus rejecting anyone who came to him. One time there was a Syrophenician woman who it seemed Jesus dismissed, but he reconsidered after he listened to her response to his dismissal. Jesus seemed less interested in directly criticizing the Roman government and instead saved most of his sharp comments for the religious leaders of his time.

Despite what these two men shared in common, their ministry or purpose was different, so it is understandable if some preferred John the Baptist's style or at least thought he seemed more messiah-like. So it should be no surprise that the author of John's Gospel emphasized that John the Baptist was not the messiah, but instead used all his gifts to point people to Jesus, who he called the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It is a beautiful phrase, the Lamb of God, and has many possible meanings. Perhaps John the Baptist was referring to Jesus as the Passover Lamb, the one whose blood protected the Israelites from the Angel of Death in the Exodus story, as Jesus' sacrifice saves us from everlasting death and restores us to life everlasting. This is a recurring theme in John's Gospel, we can see it especially in how the author of John wrote about Jesus' death in ways that overlap

with the Passover, which is different from the other Gospels. (By the way, the differences in the Gospels do mean one Gospel is right and others are wrong. This is not about proving news sources. Instead the differences in the Gospels are intended to help us see the rich theological diversity of how different early Christian communities shared the Gospel, how they saw Jesus, how their communities revealed Jesus to the world.) John the Baptist could also have been referring to the prophet Isaiah who made references to a suffering servant as the messiah. John the Baptist could also have been referring to the lambs (usually the best of the flocks) offered up at the end of the day as sacrifices in the temple, the sacrifice that was to remove sins. Or maybe John the Baptist meant to invoke a combination of all these images. Either way, his name for Jesus points to who Jesus is and what Jesus did, how the community of John's Gospel and you and I here today might see Jesus.

After announcing a second time that Jesus is the Lamb of God, two of John the Baptist's disciples left him, and followed Jesus. Notice John the Baptist did not get upset, he didn't yell after them and ask where did they think they were going, John the Baptist let them go. Perhaps the author of John's Gospel was trying to show that it was okay to leave behind whatever a person has been following when they recognize Jesus for who he is and follow him.

Then Jesus asked the question that perhaps is the question that holds this entire section of today's Gospel together: "What are you looking for?" Notice Jesus didn't ask who they were looking for. But what. Were they looking for a big talker, a celebrity, a politician, a hero who would offer them escape, protection, promises, hope, or policies? Perhaps such desires could lead to disappointment because such desires could indicate the would-be followers had already decided what the messiah should be. Instead of answering, the followers asked where he was staying, and Jesus did something so very Jesus in return: he invited them to come and see. To be open, curious, vulnerable, to move ahead without knowing for sure important details like where Jesus was staying, what he was up to, what tomorrow might bring. Jesus invited them to come along and discover for themselves.

We heard that one follower, Andrew, not only accepted this invitation but hurried to go back for his brother. All this happened, the author of John was sure to tell us, near the end of the day, at 4:00 in the afternoon. Which might be a strange detail to include; it could be interpreted that is why the disciples stayed with Jesus, because all this took place at the end of the day. But perhaps the author of John is using the time of day to tell us once more what the disciples saw. The Jews of Jesus

time, and the Gospel writer did not tell time like we do. They measured the days as 12 hours not 24 hours long; and one 12-hour day was from sun up or sunrise to sun down or sunset. The first hour was about 6:00 am and the 6th hour was noon, the 12th hour was 6:00 pm, which made 4:00 in the afternoon the 10th hour.

The 10th hour, some scholars tell us, was the hour for or just after the evening sacrifice, when the lambs had been offered for the people's sins. This brings us back to John the Baptist's declaration of Jesus being the Lamb of God, which is sort of lovely that the author drew that type of connection with the end of the disciples following John the Baptist to the beginning of following Jesus the Lamb of God at the time when the sacrifice of the lamb had been offered up in the temple.

St. Augustine saw an even deeper meaning in the 10th hour, as the number 10 is also the number of commandments. For St. Augustine, it was the author of John's Gospel way of saying the time or the hour had come as the giver of law had arrived to fulfill the law. St. Augustine would answer Jesus' question: "What are you looking for?" with the word *fulfillment*.

In this season of Epiphany, a time the church has set aside for revealing Jesus, so we can get to know better who we follow, perhaps the question "what are you looking for?" is a good one for us too. What are we looking for in worship? In Jesus? Are we looking for some reflection of ourselves? Our preferences? Our ideas? Or are we open to listening to John the Baptist who is speaking to us in our Gospel today pointing us to something larger than ourselves: to the Lamb of God. Are we open to receiving Jesus' invitation one more time to come and see what is outside ourselves?

In these days when we it can be so easy and so convenient to stay in those so-called echo chambers where we hear the same or similar versions of the same ideas, can we be brave enough to step outside those comfort zones and see and listen. It doesn't mean we have to buy what others are selling, or behave like someone we disagree with, and it might take a concerted effort to learn to identify the integrity of the source material, but showing the openness to at least listen to another is taking a step in following Jesus who is still says come and see. To see if we can see Christ in our neighbor, or let God's love as we know it in Christ be seen by our neighbors. Perhaps hearing once again about John the Baptist is a gift reminding us that no matter what happens around us or to us, it is important to keep looking to and following not ourselves, or to someone who only reflects what we want to see, but to Jesus, who is our savior, our hope, who we follow, and who we can invite others to come and see.