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John 1.6-8, 19-28) RCL

## The Forerunner and Our Vocation

Have you ever wondered what it must have been like to have been John, whom we call the Baptist, forerunner of the Christ? John lives perpetually in the shadow of Jesus of Nazareth, as do we and as is right, but I'm still fascinated by what his experience of life was.

He was born of very elderly parents in a time when almost all children had parents in their teens and twenties and early thirties. There was an extraordinary story connected with his conception and birth (Luke 1.1-25), a story of his father's encounter with the divine focused on an angelic appearance, a story in which the whole community participated. This child was marked out from the beginning. When next scripture tells of him, he is a thirty-something year old man coming in from the desert to call God's people to a change of heart. After his death, Jesus would call him the greatest of all the prophets.

Jesus and John were cousins of about the same age. It's no stretch of the imagination to think of them as knowing one another as they grew up. Perhaps they compared notes. Perhaps each of them had intimations of the destiny that awaited them. Perhaps they wondered about this mysterious Presence in their lives that was more real to them than to others. Were they puzzled, or were they assured? My money is on puzzled. God's ways with Her children are often not clear at the beginning and the evangelist Luke says that even Jesus the Messiah grew in wisdom and favor (1.52). He developed as a human being, and so did John. It is no putdown to say that they grew in human life and experience. It is part of how and why we relate so closely to Jesus; He is divine, but He also knows our experience of life intimately.

Jesus was defined in His work by the forty days He spent in the desert after John baptized Him. I imagine John going into the same desert, following the same Divine Spirit, early in his life, perhaps at the time of the death of his

parents. There God prepared him for the work he was to do, to announce the coming of the Messiah, God's Man to heal and save humankind. God's work is dangerous. King Herod killed John the Baptist for proclaiming the word of God even to the king himself. Pontius Pilate killed Jesus for even greater faithfulness. God's work is dangerous.

When was it that John realized his cousin, his soul-mate, was more than even he imagined? Was it at that moment in the Jordan River when Jesus came to John for initiation into His own work? Perhaps the world shifted on its axis as the river's water touched the feet of his cousin, and John saw the true meaning of their devotion to God. Or was it earlier, some lonesome, revelatory experience as John prays to and with his God? Is there some unknown desert cave that should be the site of pilgrimage, where humanity began to accept a closer relationship with its God?

We'll have to ask John when we get to heaven. I think it will be a fascinating conversation. What we do know is that John committed himself without reserve to God's work. He had one moment of doubt, as he stood behind prison bars. His cousin, whom he had recognized as the Messiah, was preaching a message about God that puzzled John. He sent disciples to ask Jesus if He was who John thought He was. We're not told, but I'll bet his cousin's reply reassured him: look at the signs – they are the signs of the Messiah: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them (Luke 7.22). John could die in peace, a martyr to his God. What he understood himself to be, the one sent to announce the advent of the Messiah, the coming of God's power to save, was true. John's life was vindicated and he could await the executioner's sword with peace.

Mary is sometimes thought of as the Mother of Humanity, since she is the mother of Jesus, into whom we are all incorporated by God's grace (1 Corinthians 12.1-31). She is his mother, therefore she is our mother. I think John the Baptist should be declared the patron saint of humanity, the saint in whom we can all see clearly the meaning of our own lives.

For John the Baptist was not the main show; Jesus was and is. John was sent to dig the ground, harrow the field, plant the seed, so that when the sun of God's power, the Son of God Himself, came, the seed could grow and flourish into new life. Isn't that what we are all about? We are all forerunners of God's mercy to the world. We have known the mercy and love of God in Christ, and we are sent to proclaim that love to the world, so that the world might recognize and accept the Christ when He comes to them. We are all parts of the Body of Jesus Christ, but we are all also prophets of His message and His work. We are sent to point out to our brothers and sisters that One has come among us who is greater than we are, whose sandals we are not worthy to untie, who will lead us to a new life, a new way of living, both here and hereafter. Here we learn to trust God, to heal and forgive and love; hereafter we will live in the fullness of His resurrection, the resurrection that has become our own through God's love.

So here is what you and I are all about. We, too, are voices crying out to those who are dying for our message, that God is making straight His pathway to us, that God is filling in the holes and leveling off the speedbumps in the wilderness of our lives, so that She can come to us speedily. You and I live in the assurance of that divine love and activity. It is our calling, our vocation, to bring the rest of humanity into the same assurance. That is what the Bethlehem Baby is all about. That is what we are all about. We are blessed in that Baby. We are to be a blessing to all humankind. Amen.