

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
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Advent through the Eyes of John the Baptist
John 1:6-8, 19-28
December 17, 2017

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⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. ²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

This week I heard a story (originally told by the theologian Brian McClaren who spoke here at DCPC this past September), about a middle-aged woman named Graciela, who lives in a small farming town in northern Argentina.

You see, Graciela, and her daughter, Leticia, have been living an adventure that has consumed their lives for the past sixteen years. It began with a family vacation, visiting Graciela's sister in southern Argentina. They decided to drive up into the mountains to visit a community of indigenous people—a tourist trip, really, nothing more.

But as they left the green and fertile fields of the valley and ascended the rocky, inhospitable mountains to the west, Graciela somehow realized that she was encountering her own history—the history of colonization that drove the indigenous people farther and farther from their ancestral homelands, down from temperate north to frigid south, up from the fertile lowland valleys into inhospitable mountains, until they found their last option survival at this cold, high, rocky margin—literally on the edge of existence.

All of this hit her, and she began to weep and couldn't stop weeping. When they reached the village—a town of just a few hundred people—her heart and the hearts of her whole family bonded with the villagers, and Graciela promised they would return, which they did, many times over the ensuing years.

But Graciela, her husband, Luiz, and their family were careful not to do what too many well-meaning "whites" do ("whites" being what the indigenous people call the European descendants of the conquistadors): they didn't want to "assist" the people in paternalizing ways that would only wound their dignity even further, fostering dependence and humiliation.

So, instead they asked the people what their biggest problem was, and then they offered to join them as helpers in solving it. The biggest problem? They needed a school so their children would have a place in their own community to learn and grow.

So over the coming years, Graciela, and her family, rounded up help—an architect, volunteers from their local church, mostly young people who paid their own way. Eventually, even the mayor of their town heard about the project and asked if he could join them. They made the thirty-plus hour trip by car and train season after season. And in the coming years, over many visits, they not only built a school, but in the process, they showed honor and respect and

love to the indigenous people who had been, for so many centuries, treated with scorn and neglect and so much worse.

But a question wouldn't let go of McClaren's mind: "Why," he asked her, "didn't the people try to build a school before?"

Graciela didn't hesitate a second when he asked her what held the indigenous people back. "The people had no hope," she said. She continued, "when people have no hope, all they think about is scraping by for one more day. There is no tomorrow, there is no creativity, there is no will to organize, people can't even think straight, because they have no hope."¹

Hope! It's a powerful and necessary thing for humans to thrive and grow.

I want you to think about this in terms of an important person Jesus's life—John the Baptist. Jesus was a disciple—a follower—of John the Baptist.

Who was John the Baptist?

You see, at some point in his life, Jesus must have become a religious seeker and embarked upon a religious quest: in his late twenties—or around the age of thirty—he left Nazareth and became a follower of a wilderness prophet named John.

We do not know whether this decision was the result of a gradual maturing or the product of a more sudden and dramatic religious experience. But something led him to leave conventional life behind and go out to the wilderness to become a follower of John the Baptizer.

We may further surmise that Jesus probably underwent what William James calls a "conversion experience." The conversion, of course, was not from paganism to Judaism, for he grew up Jewish. Rather, as James defines it:

"Conversion need not refer to changing from one religion to another, or from being nonreligious to being religious; it may also refer to a process, whether sudden or gradual, whereby religious impulses and energies become central to one's life."

So, it's reasonable to suppose that Jesus experienced such an internal transformation, which led him to undertake the ministry that he did, and that this probably had something to do with John the Baptist.

Clearly, Jesus' relationship to John was important. Not only do all of the gospels begin the story of Jesus' adult activity with his association with John, but about him Jesus is reported to have said, *"There is no one born of woman greater than John."*

That is high praise, indeed! Mark, for instance, dates the beginnings of Jesus' ministry to John's arrest, which suggests minimally that, with his mentor in prison, Jesus stepped in to carry on.

And beyond the minimal, we may also wonder if the arrest and execution of the Baptist were even more significant for Jesus—the fate of his mentor must have been a vivid reminder to him of what happened to unauthorized leaders who attracted a significant following in the tense political atmosphere of first-century Palestine. In any case, it is in connection with John that Jesus' personal story became public history.²

This is what the great contemporary biblical scholars, Michael White and John Dominic Crossan have to say about John the Baptist:

¹ Brian McClaren, *Everything Must Change*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 2007, pp. 277-280

² Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Harper, San Francisco, CA, 1994, pp. 27-28, 31

(John) was a renowned kind of eccentric, it appears, from the way that Josephus describes him. But he seems to have this quality of a kind of prophetic figure ... one who was calling for change. So he is usually thought of as being off in the desert wearing unusual clothes ... a kind of ascetic, almost. But what he is really is a critic of society, of worldliness, who seems to be calling for a change in religious life. But I think we have to think of John the Baptist primarily as one who was calling for a return to an intensely Jewish piety ... to follow the way of the Lord ... to make oneself pure ... to be right with God.

*John the Baptist, of course, is known for having practiced baptism. But then, so did lots of other people. We hear of other groups around this time, besides the Sadducees and the Pharisees and Essenes. There are the obscure little groups. We only know their names, but one of them is called Morning Dippers This seems to refer to a group that practiced self-washing ... ritual washing as an act of purification. We also know from the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, that the Qumran community practiced ritual washing as an act of purification as well, to keep themselves pure before God. So, the idea of baptizing, or washing as a sign of purity seems to come, actually, out of the Temple practice itself. It was a way of expressing repentance in the face of imminent judgment.*

*The difference I see between John the Baptist and Jesus is, to use some fancy academic language that, John is an **apocalyptic eschatologist**. An eschatologist is somebody who sees that the problem of the world is so radical that it's going to take some kind of divine radical solution to solve it. One type, for example, is John. God is going to descend in some sort of a catastrophic event to solve the world.*

*There is another type of eschatology. And that's what I think Jesus is talking [about]. I'm going to call it **ethical eschatology**. That is the demand that God is making on us, not us on God so much as God on us, to do something about the evil in the world. In an apocalypse, as it were, we are waiting for God. And in ethical eschatology, God is waiting for us. That's, I think, what Jesus is talking about in the Kingdom of God. It's demand for us to do something in conjunction with God. It is the Kingdom of God. But it's the Kingdom on earth of God.³*

Another word for “ethical eschatology” is *hope!*

Imagine, if you will, Jesus wandering through the villages of Galilee, walking among his own oppressed and dominated people, people who, like the people of that indigenous village visited by Graciela, had lost their hope. Their hopelessness left them paralyzed and powerless between two primary schemes of *despair*—the *violent despair* of terrorist resistance or the *resigned despair* of capitulation and collaboration with their powerful oppressors.

He didn't fix all of their problems, even though many of them wanted him to and hated him when he didn't. He didn't organize an army or hatch a plot or design liberal democracy or create a new get-rich-quick business plan. He didn't scapegoat anybody—if anything, he kept letting scapegoats off the hook, taking their side to the consternation of their hyper-religious critics.

Instead, he simply let the people know that he liked them—and so did God, that he was interested in them, that they didn't have to be ashamed of who they were. He came close to them in their illnesses, wept with them at the graves of their loved ones, ate at their tables, drank their wine, listened to their words, let himself be injured by their pain—and, laughed with them, as well.

And he did one other thing--he told them that something was already true: *the kingdom of God is here*.

Already! Here in its full flower? No. But here in reality? Yes. And all that he invited them to do was to believe it. And somehow, some of them did.

Friends, this is the beautiful rush of wonder that is *hope!* Hope tells us that if we dare to believe today, schools can be built, economies can be turned around, the rich and powerful with all their talents and advantages can turn away

³ Frontline, “A Portrait of Jesus’ World,” WGBH, Boston, 1998

from greed alone and invest their energies on behalf of their poor neighbors, that old injustices can be acknowledged, and new relationships born.

If we *believe* we can be converted from over-consumers to creative stewards, from empire builders to community builders, who discover a magnificent vision and a sacred mission that give our lives unimagined meaning.

If we *believe*, we can be transformed into agents of something beautiful that is trying to be born in our world. We can be caught up in the unfolding, emergent, spiraling process of God giving birth to a beautiful whole, the kingdom of God.⁴

Amen!

⁴ Brian McClaren, *Everything Must Change*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 2007, pp. 280-282