

“Early Recognizers of Jesus: John the Baptist”

Mary Henderson Bowman

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This morning we are spending time with John the Baptist, one of the earliest recognizers of Jesus.

Most of us associate John the Baptist with the baptism of Jesus — and rightly so!
But there is more dimensionality to John the Baptist than that.

Our Scripture readings this morning capture the early recognition of Jesus and Mary by John the Baptist. We are told that John the Baptist leaps for joy in the womb when he hears pregnant Mary’s voice.

We also hear that John is “the prophet of the Most High.”

John is to “go before the Lord and to prepare His ways and to give His people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.”

Luke tells us that this is all because of “the tender mercy of our God.”

And John is to bear witness to “the dawn that will break upon us and shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

When John and Jesus come together for the baptism, there is no acknowledgement of Jesus being John’s cousin. Instead, there is simply the same kind of recognition that Jesus is the One.

John has done his job. All is well. All makes sense. All is as it should be.

Until . . . that is . . . we move to our second Scripture reading..

We hear that John has sent his disciples to ask a question of Jesus.

John cannot ask the question of Jesus himself because John is in prison and so John sends his disciples.

The question for Jesus: . . . “Are you the One who was to come or are we to look for somebody else?”

Now I think I should pause here just a moment because this is a plot twist that many of us did not see coming.

What is going on here???

In the womb, John leaped for joy in recognition.

At Jesus’ baptism, John affirmed Jesus as the One.

And now, John the Baptist is asking if Jesus is the One.

Why has John lost the ability to recognize Jesus as the One?

What is going on?!?

Here is the question that I think John is really asking Jesus . . .

“if I am Your prophet and You are indeed the Most High God, then what the heck am I doing suffering in prison?”

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I think there are two things at work here . . . circumstances and expectations.
First, John is in the midst of extremely difficult circumstances.
And secondly, John seems to be experiencing disappointed expectations of God.

Challenging circumstances and unmet expectations.

How many of us have not asked this question of Jesus?

Jesus, if You are the One . . . then why have I been given this medical diagnosis?
Jesus, if You are the One . . . then how could you have allowed my loved one to die so young?
God, if You are real . . . then what am I doing in these painful circumstances?
God, if You are real . . . then why can't my loved one break free from addiction or mental illness?
Jesus, if You have brought Your kingdom . . . then why does the world look like it does?
Jesus, if You have brought Your kingdom . . . then why am I suffering?

And so we ask . . . Jesus, are You really the One?

I have to tell you that this has become one of my favorite passages in the New Testament.

Three reasons jump out at me . . .

First, I love it because it names and honors and gives space to one of the deepest questions of the human heart . . . why are these circumstances happening and where are You God?

Secondly, I love that Jesus does not take offense.

Jesus is not critical of John, and Jesus does not send a message of condemnation back to John.

Instead, Jesus assures John that Jesus is indeed the One.

Jesus may not be doing the expected.

But Jesus is God on the move, bringing mercy and bringing God's loving presence.

Thirdly, I love that John the Baptist knows who to ask this question to.

It is easy when we are in difficult circumstances to complain to others, to give into the accusation that God must not care, to keep expecting

Jesus affirms John's instinct to come to Jesus.

Jesus can handle our anger and our tears, our heartache and our weariness.

Jesus is God with us and reminds us that if we are weary we are to come to Him.

Eli Weisel, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, used to say that he had lots of reasons to give up on God but Eli chose to stay in God's embrace even if that meant beating on God's chest in frustration and grief.

Jesus closes His message to John with a blessing . . . "happy is the one who never loses faith in me."

Jesus is telling John not to lose faith, not to lose hope.

God is on the move.

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Jesus also seems to be telling John that John needs to look again at his expectations of God.
Somethings needs adjusting.
Something needs transformation.
God has not come to make our lives easy.
God has purposes that we will not always understand.

Interestingly, Jesus will also be imprisoned and Jesus will also be executed.
Jesus did not ask his prophet to suffer something that He himself was unwilling to do.
God knows all to well the suffering within our world.
And that is why God came in the flesh to dwell among us and that is why God has promised to never leave or forsake us.

We all have times when our understanding of God needs examining.
We all have times when God stretches us to hold both the goodness of God and the suffering of this world.
Like John the Baptist, we can allow our circumstances to cause us to lose sight of the goodness of God and God’s love and faithfulness and companionship.

A question we might ask ourselves . . . am I letting my challenging circumstances set my understanding of God — or can I let my understanding of God shape my circumstances?