

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

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Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:13-17

8 January, 2017



When I first read the gospel for today, my heart sank: not John the Baptist. That wild-eyed, half-deranged man who lives in the desert, eats locusts and honey, wears camel hair, says the world will end any day, insults whole groups of folks right and left, says God's about to sort the wheat from the chaff, with the chaff off to unquenchable fire. I appreciate that he's a prophet in a long line of great Hebrew prophets. Maybe it's because I grew up in a small, southeast Georgia town in a sea of Southern Baptist, for whom John is the only saint and immersion is the only valid baptism, but I'm not having a beer with the guy.

I have to give John some credit today, however. When Jesus, having left his life in Nazareth, strides up to him at the River, John gets it right away. Maybe it's the way Jesus looks into his eyes. But John immediately knows—somehow—that this man brings God near. “This is backwards. You should baptize me.” (John) “No, bear with me, we need to do it this way.” (Jesus) Coming up out of the River, water running off his head and eyes and beard, Jesus looks again into John's eyes. The Spirit. The voice. The words: “This is my Son, whom I love.” It's done. Shortly, Jesus leaves for the desert where he will be tempted. After that, as he begins his ministry, he hears that John has been arrested.

No surprise there. Like any good prophet, John can't keep his mouth shut. He has all the political subtlety of a sledgehammer. A true prophet in any age slices like a freshly sharpened knife right through all the everydayness that clutters our eyes to say—usually with painful clarity—what we need, but do not want, to hear: that we fall short, that our faith is lacking, that our prayers are empty words, that something is wrong. This time John's impolitic tongue gets him in trouble with the same Herod who down the road will mock Jesus at his trial.

Here's what's happened. Herod stops by his brother Philip's estate for a visit, during which he and Philip's wife Herodias, well, embark on an affair right under Philip's nose. (Now all these folks are Jews.) Herod leaves Philip's palace, and Herodias leaves with him, even though she's still married to Philip, who hasn't divorced her yet (only husbands can divorce wives at the time). Soon Herod and Herodias are ensconced in Herod's palace on the cliffs overlooking the Sea of Galilee, which comes as a bit of a surprise to Herod's actual wife. Who needs the Real Housewives of Atlanta, right? (Ultimately, these shenanigans lead to such a mess that Caesar banished this Herod to Gaul, sort of like being sent to Siberia at the time.)

With Herod and Herodias carrying on so publicly, John just can't help himself. “It's not lawful for you to have her,” he tells Herod. Technically, John's right. It's says it right there in the Torah (Leviticus), twice, plain as day: You may not take your brother's wife. Could John have taken a more prudent, Psalm-1-like approach (“Herod, the law is a gift of God. Those who follow it are like trees planted by streams, they grow, prosper, live long.”)? Not in John's playbook. Angry, Herod tosses John in jail, but that's about all he can do. And John knows it. As that first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us, John is popular, he has lots of disciples (including Andrew, later a disciple of Jesus), and most Jews see him as a prophet and righteous man. In those tumultuous times, for Herod to do anything more than put John in time out would risk a riot.

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So John steps in a first-century prison cell. We can imagine how pleasant that was. His disciples visit him, catching him up on this and that, including Jesus. At the outset, John smiles to hear that the very first words out of Jesus' mouth as he begins his ministry are John's words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" But soon John does not like what he hears about Jesus. Jesus eats and drinks and hangs out with sinners of all stripes (tax collectors, prostitutes, you know the list). This vexes John. Remember what he preaches: Very soon, any moment, God will come and eradicate all the evil in this world, God will put the axe to the root, God will sort the wheat from the chaff—so repent, follow the way of the Lord, make yourselves pure for the end times!

John calls all those who come to him from Jerusalem and Judea (and apparently it was quite a crowd) to an intense Jewish piety for the last days: "Get your righteousness on, folks!" To translate into Episcopalian: attend the Eucharist regularly, read the Bible, use the Daily Devotionals (p. 136) and the Prayers and Thanksgivings (p. 814—the 1-800 prayers) in the BCP, fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, tithe, give up something for Lent, do good works. Practically speaking, it's hard to argue with all this (though folks who come to church when the temp is in the teens are not the folks who need to hear this). As the popular DJ Khaled says, and he's not talking just about the weather, "It's a cold world. Bundle up. Key." In other words, these spiritual practices (and they do take practice) are ways of bundling ourselves up in a cold world. But—and maybe this is where John gets it wrong—they're only a means of grace, not an end in themselves.

Hearing all that Jesus is up to, John sends his disciples to him. "Ask him, 'Why do your disciples not fast like we do, like the Pharisees do?'" "How can you fast when the bridegroom is here?!" Jesus responds, "You can fast later! And who puts new wine in old wineskins anyway?"

When John's disciples report back to him in prison, it must have felt like a punch in the gut to John. He gets the slight: John's the old wineskin, Jesus the new wine. Now obsessed, angry, with rivers of puritan righteousness rushing through his veins, John sends his disciples back to Jesus, this time to confront him head on: "Ask him this: 'Are you the one? Or should we wait for another?'" Sounds like a rhetorical question to me. Not defensive, Jesus responds anyway: "Tell John the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the lepers are clean, the dead are raised, and the poor hear good news." Seeing what is in John's heart, Jesus adds, "And tell John, 'Blessed is anyone who does not take offense at me.'"

As much as I dislike John, it's painful to see him so imprisoned by his expectations for who Jesus should be or what the Kingdom of Heaven should be like. Jesus should not be eating and drinking with sinners, he should put the axe to the root, ferret out the wheat from the chaff! John does take offense at Jesus. How hard it is for John—and for us—to see, really to see who Jesus is. Is it the ordinary but terrible egoism we all sometimes have that keeps John from finding a path to humility, to generosity, to openness? Maybe each of us just creates a Jesus in our own image, who agrees with our opinions, shares our prejudices, votes like us? Perhaps John is constitutionally unable to let his expectations of Jesus go? I've worried about this for me. The only two jobs (besides lifeguard) I've had—ordained Methodist minister (10 years) and practicing lawyer (almost 25)—are professions Jesus notoriously did not get along with. Maybe I'm constitutionally unable to see Jesus. Whatever the reason, our expectations for who Jesus should be and for what the Kingdom should look like can harden our hearts and make us miss what is right in front of us. Here is God in flesh, blood, sinew, looking deep into John's and our eyes, into our selves—bringing us truth and grace in which we can only and wonderfully drown. "This is my Son, whom I love." Do we like John cling to our expectations for Jesus as though our very faith depends on them (it does not)? Or can we take a deep breath, relax our clinched hands, and let our expectations go. Yes. It is hard. But we will be OK.

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On a far more mundane level, we as a parish and as individuals in these pews will over the next months and year have the chance to let go of some of our expectations for our next rector. Will she be a brilliant preacher? Will she have a raucous sense of humor? Will she fit our personality like a glove? Will she be unfailingly kind? Will she be a she? Sydney and I joined All Saints' in 1985, and over the years I have seen this Church show remarkable grace to our rectors and priests, grace that other parishes could not even fathom. Even so, we do bring a host of expectations—some healthy, some neurotic—to the doorsteps of our rector and our priests, especially in this age where we can so easily fall into the trap of being religious consumers instead of grown-up people of faith. So we may anxiously, even defiantly cling to our expectations for our next rector. But we have a chance to set aside all that we expect, all that we want, all that we need—to get a fully human being, flesh, bone, sinew, and (I'm sure) broken just as each of us is broken in our own way. This is not a sentimental welcome mat. Far from it. To let go of our expectations, to open ourselves up, this is the hard work of making room for the Spirit to move among us. We will be OK. All Saints' will be OK.

Back to John. It's Herod's birthday feast. Herodias's daughter Salome dances for the guests and so delights her stepfather (you can tell he's had too much to drink) that he vows to give her anything she wants, expecting, since she's only a girl, she'll ask for a pony or to go to the fifth-grade dance with someone she likes. Overwhelmed by this vow, Salome rushes to her mother, Herodias. Still wounded by John's words, she whispers, "Ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter." Too drunk, too spineless to say "no" to this outrageous request and risk embarrassment in front of his guests, Herod sends a soldier to John's prison cell. (Check out online Titian's and Caravaggio's beautiful paintings of this painful scene.) John's biding his time, expecting to be released. After all, he said to Herod only what was in the Torah, only what was true. By the time the soldier gets there, has John let go of his expectations for Jesus, sending them flying like dry leaves in a cold wind, opening himself really to see Jesus, to let good news break into his heart? Or does John stubbornly cling to his expectations, righteous mind that he is, absolutely convicted that he is right? It's hard to know. Amen.