

The Third Sunday After the Epiphany

“After John was Arrested”

A Sermon based on Mark 1:14-15

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Mark 1:14-15 ~ ⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”



St John (right) in *Christ in the House of His Parents* by John Everett Millais, 1849–50

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“Now after John was arrested ...” That is how this week’s lectionary passage in the Gospel of Mark begins. Sermons jump over this little opening phrase and rush Jesus off to Galilee to begin his public ministry proclaiming the good news of God and calling two sets of brothers to be his first disciples: Andrew and Simon Peter, James and John. They seldom stop to look at the little phrase “Now after John was arrested.” But I want to pause here today to take in what this is all about. Today’s sermon is not designed to be inspirational but educational so put on your thinking caps and be patient as we work our way through some scripture.

While some commentators point out that this little phrase is the connective seam between Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness and the beginning of his public ministry, it is so much more than that. Why? Because we really can’t fully understand Jesus without taking into account the enormous influence that John had on the life of Jesus. On a surface level what this phrase is telling us is that it was only after John no longer was able to carry out his ministry that Jesus was freed to carry out his.

John. Who was he? He was absolutely the most important influence on Jesus’ life. Have you noticed that neither Mark nor John begin with or even include the birth of the baby Jesus? Indeed, in the Gospel of Mark the writer immediately begins by saying that the prophet Isaiah had written of a messenger, a voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord. ***“And so John came”*** (Mk 1:4). This is followed by a description of John baptizing people in the Jordan River, one of whom was Jesus. In Mark we meet Jesus not as a baby in a manger but as a 30-year-old adult who is baptized by John. Neither does the Gospel of John begin with Jesus’ birth but rather with the preexistent LOGOS through whom all things were made, in whom there was life, and which was a light shining in the darkness. John then immediately states that ***“there came a man who was sent from God; his name was John”*** (Jn 1:6). John was to be a voice testifying to the light that was coming into the world, following which there is a long description of John’s identity and his baptism of Jesus. Again, we first meet Jesus as a grown man in relation to his being baptized by John. In each of these John, not Jesus, is the opening major player in the salvation story.

Unlike Mark or John, the Gospel of Luke does include the birth story of Jesus. Have you noticed, however, that before the birth of Jesus is foretold, the birth of another baby is first foretold? Before he gets to Jesus, the Gospel of Luke begins by saying that a sacred conception will occur. The angel Gabriel appears to an aging priest Zechariah, who is doing his required rotation in the Temple, and, after telling him not to be afraid, announces that his postmenopausal

barren wife Elizabeth will bear a son whom they are to name John. The angel tells Zechariah in Luke 1:13-17 that:

“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

When Zechariah expresses his disbelief that his barren wife could become pregnant he is struck dumb and rendered unable to speak. That is how Luke’s Gospel begins. With John, not Jesus. This is followed by a parallel annunciation story when the angel Gabriel appears to a young woman named Mary and announces that she, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is going to have a baby named Jesus, who will be called ***“the Son of God”*** (Lk 1:35). When Mary is incredulous, the angel tells her that nothing is impossible with God. To witness God’s power she might visit her cousin Elizabeth who, although barren, is now already six months pregnant. So Mary rushes off to the hill country of Judea to see if this is true. There was a knock at Elizabeth’s door. She opened it and saw her younger cousin Mary. No sooner had Mary greeted her when Elizabeth’s ***“baby leaped in her womb [for joy]”*** (Lk 1:41, 44), fulfilling the angel’s prophesy that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother’s womb (Lk 1:15). It was as though there was an immediate spiritual connection between the two babies. Mary told her cousin Elizabeth about her divine conception, then stayed with her for three months, trading pregnancy stories I’m sure, and then returned home about the time Elizabeth was going to give birth.

The story then picks up not with Jesus but again with the birth of John. When the infant was eight days old and about to be circumcised, in keeping with Jewish tradition, they asked what he was to be named. This was probably just seen as a formality because they surely assumed that he would be named after his father Zechariah. One can only imagine their astonishment when both his parents responded that he was to be named John, following which Zechariah immediately regained his ability to speak and prophesized in a beautiful song of praise known as the “Benedictus” about his son John that:

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. (Luke 1:76-79)

This makes clear the major and essential role John was to play in our salvation history. Luke ends this section by saying about John that *[t]he child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel. (Lk 1:80)*. Note that it appears that he does not stay in his parent's home but is sent off at a young age to live in the wilderness. It is only at this point that Luke's Gospel picks up the story of Jesus' birth taking us until the time that Jesus is 12 years old (the end of chapter two). And then, instead of continuing on with Jesus' life, Luke immediately returns to telling the story of Jesus' cousin John.

When Luke picks up in chapter three John has been living out in the wilderness for many years. Historians date it to the year AD 25-26. Matthew describes the location more accurately as "the Desert of Judea," which is a 20-mile piece of land extending between the Jerusalem-Bethlehem plateau to the Jordan River and Dead Sea. We learn from Matthew's Gospel (3:4) that: *"John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey."* We had earlier learned that he drank no alcohol. John, it seems, had taken a Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:1-5), forbidding him from cutting his hair or drinking alcohol. It is quite possible that John, with his unusual dress and diet, was part of the Essene community, who lived at Qumran in this Desert of Judea, known through writings discovered in 1952 called the "Dead Sea Scrolls." Why might John be there? Some wonder whether John's aging parents might have died early and that, rather than staying with extended family, he went out into the wilderness to stay with the Essenes, who were known to adopt children and raise them in their ways. The Roman author Pliny the Elder (AD 23/24 – 79) wrote about the Essenes that *"On the west side of the Dead Sea ... is the solitary tribe of the Essenes, which is remarkable beyond all the other tribes in the whole world, as it has no women and has renounced all sexual desire, has no money, and has only palm trees for company"* (Natural History 5:17.4). This would explain why John was single, along with his eccentric appearance and diet.

Additionally, the Essenes were known not only for worshipping and studying but also for their water purification rites in which recruits underwent something like baptism, and then continued to dip themselves daily in water for the first few years of their initiation period. We know how important water rituals were for John as he was known as "John the Baptizer" or "John the Baptist." Qumran was very close to the Jordan River where John was baptizing people. And what makes it even more likely that John was part of the Essene community is the fact that they, like John, rejected the Jewish priests and Temple which was built around sacrificial offerings on behalf of the people by priests for the forgiveness of sins.

The story of John continues with Luke telling us that, around the year AD 25-26: ***“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee ...² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”*** (Luke 3:1-6)

Matthew’s Gospel (3:1-2, 5) puts it this way: ***In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ...⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.***

We have read this story so many times that, because of our Christian lens, we actually miss the significance of what is going on here. For John, perhaps inspired by the Essene community at Qumran, is breaking free from and defying the Jewish teaching that forgiveness is achieved through sacrifices on one’s behalf by priests at the Temple. John teaches and practices that a person can be forgiven by confessing one’s sins on one’s own, apart from priests and the Temple, and being baptized through a ritual with water. Astonishing! One no longer needs the Temple with its complicated (and possibly expensive) sacrificial system! One no longer needs the priests. John seems to have invented the idea you could have your sins forgiven by God by repenting and being baptized in water. You don’t have to go the Temple to sacrifice animals! “I’m telling you ,” John might have said, “God only needs repentance!” Water baptism replaces animal sacrifice in the Temple. No wonder John (and later Jesus) were to be hated by the authorities! No wonder the messenger would need to be killed!

John’s message had really taken hold as crowds of people from all over Judea, including the city of Jerusalem, were flocking to him to be baptized, receiving forgiveness for their shortcomings through their repentance leading to a reorientation in their lives. John had a message of urgency because he expected imminent judgment. The Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven was breaking through, John proclaimed!

Among the “crowds” coming to be baptized by John, there may have been some skeptics or even spies sent from the Temple to see what John was doing. John saw through them. He saw they were bearing bad fruit. He called them a “brood of vipers” (Lk 3:7-8). They might brag about being good Jews. John, however, told them that they no longer could take cover in being a “chosen people.” The doors of God’s Kingdom were wide open to anyone, including foreigners, Gentiles. John makes this point when he says to the crowd around him: ⁸ ***Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.***” (Lk 3:7-9)

“Please tell us what we should do in addition to confessing our sins and being baptized?” the crowd asked. John then spelled out for them in practical terms what repentance or changing one’s orientation in life looked like. For it was not enough just doing an inventory of one’s life, asking forgiveness, and being baptized. One’s new orientation in life also needed to be embodied and enacted. This is what you have to do, said John.

- Share with others out of your bounty. If you have two coats, give one to a person who doesn’t have one. Share your food with others. (Lk 3:11)
- To the tax collectors he said, don’t collect more money than required and pocket some for yourself. (Lk 3:12-13)
- To the soldiers he said, don’t extort money and accuse people falsely. (Lk 3:14)

It is to be noted that John addresses tax collectors and soldiers, the very people expected to carry out Herod’s orders and that of the Roman Empire, calling them to question to whom they were ultimately to be obedient. And it seems that he also is saying that these basic laws of generosity, mercy, justice, and compassion are to be extended to everyone, not just the children of Abraham.

The crowd got excited and wondered whether John was the one the prophets had foretold, the one like Elijah crying out in the wilderness they had been waiting for, the Christ. It was not only what he was saying but where he was saying it that may have prompted that question. After all, even though John’s new message of repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins could have been given in the big city of Jerusalem, the crowds had traveled a distance to be baptized by

him at a point on the Jordan River. Why there? Likely because so many sacred events in their history had taken place there. Here, almost in the shadow of Mount Nebo where Moses looked across to Canaan, Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan. This was the spot where the whirlwind carried the prophet Elijah away into the heavens, with Elisha standing nearby. This was sacred geography! No wonder the crowds may have thought that John was Elijah or the expected Messiah, who would usher in God's Kingdom.

But John set them straight, saying: ***“I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”*** (Lk 3:16)

And then, one day, as John was proclaiming the Good News to people and baptizing them for the forgiveness of sins, along came his cousin Jesus, just six months younger than he. It is not often spoken about, but they did not relate to each other the way cousins do today. In that society, cousins were part of an extended family who related more like fraternal brothers. They knew each other from the time both were in the womb, they grew up together, they talked to each other, and, we will see, they shared the same calling, theology, and mission. John would have visited with Jesus in Nazareth. Jesus would have visited with John in the wilderness. They were not mere acquaintances. They were like brothers, loyal to one another. Christian art through the centuries depicts this close relationship showing John and Jesus together as babies, children, teens, adults. They were bound at the hip.

Jesus knew that John had been preaching, teaching, and offering the ritual of baptism to his followers for the forgiveness of sins. We can imagine Jesus going up to John and saying “Hey John, brother, please baptize me!” We can imagine John perhaps saying to Jesus, “No, I’m not going to baptize you. You are supposed to have a separate ministry from mine.”

“Oh, come on, John, just go ahead and baptize me!” Jesus might have said

“Okay brother Jesus,” John said (wink! wink!). “I’ll baptize you but I’m going to tell everyone that I baptize with water but you baptize with fire.”

So John baptizes Jesus and Mark 3:10-11 reports that ***“¹⁰just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”***

John continues baptizing people, with a growing group of followers around him. Jesus leaves and goes off into the wilderness for 40 days. And, while he is there being tempted by Satan and undergoing initiation rites to begin his ministry, something terrible happens to John. He is arrested and thrown in prison. Why? There are at least two versions to this story. The first-century Romano-Jewish historian Josephus (37–c. 100) provides this account related to John’s arrest: ***“When others too joined the crowds about [John], because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did. Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation and see his mistake.”*** (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.118)

The Biblical view presents a specific incident leading to John’s arrest. John had rebuked Herod because Herod had married his brother Philip’s wife Herodias. As Mark’s Gospel (6:17-20) explains: ***17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. 18 For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.*** (cf. Luke 3:19-20)

And this is where our scripture picks up for today when it says in Mark 1:14-15: ***14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”***

“After John was arrested.” Erin Dufault-Hunter notes that “Jesus does not move into his public ministry until John is forcibly removed from his prophetic ministry. Mark does not tell us how long he delays but notes only that Jesus refuses to compete with him, waiting until John moves aside, even as he is aware that he wields more power and is more worthy of honor than the camel-haired prophet (Mark 1:7). This humility—enacted as patient timefulness—is especially notable in a Gospel in which everything seems to happen ‘immediately’. . . . Calmly confident, [Jesus] is drawn forward into public life by the space created by John’s forcible removal.” (Erin Dufault-Hunter, *Connections B/I*, p. 211)

Do you notice, however, something else even more important that is going on? After Jesus heard that John had been thrown into prison, Jesus goes off into Galilee preaching the exact same message as had John. John who offers *“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (Mark 1:4) goes out proclaiming *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”* (Matt 3:12). Our lectionary passage from Mark 1:14-15 says that: *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”*

From John, the one who was like a brother to him, in prison, Jesus picks up the baton and starts preaching John’s words to carry his message to the world. And it is a dangerous subversive message indeed to preach against animal sacrifices at the Temple, indeed the entire priestly system upon which Judaism was based, allowing people free access to God through repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What a concept! Later, John, languishing in prison and before his untimely death, sends out his disciples to ask what Jesus is doing (Matthew 11:2-19). Jesus basically responds that he is preaching John’s message, fulfilling his ministry. He is doing this for John. And as John would die because the authorities feared him, so Jesus too would die.

Just as the New Testament gives two parallel annunciation stories—one announcing the miraculous conception of John and one the miraculous conception of Jesus—and two parallel birth stories—one of John and one of Jesus, both of whom received their names by God—and two parallel messages about repentance for the forgiveness of sins and the Kingdom of God coming near—so we also are given two parallel arrest and death stories. For the verb used to describe John’s being “handed over” or “arrested” in today’s passage is the same one that later will be used to describe the betrayal of Jesus as he too is “handed over”/ “arrested” (e.g., 3:19, 9:31, 14:10, 15:1, 15) as the result of his shared ministry with John for, after John’s arrest, Jesus, following in John’s footsteps, went out, beginning in Galilee, *“proclaiming the good news of God,¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”*

Closing Prayer: Lord before we rush off with Jesus to Galilee to see him begin his public ministry with the calling of his first disciples, we pause to give thanks for the most important influence on Jesus’ life in John, the one known as the Baptizer, the one you called to prepare the way for Jesus ministry. We thank you for his life, his ministry, and, with Jesus, we grieve his unjust death at the hands of those who felt threatened by him. In the name of your son Jesus, who was like a brother to John, we offer up this prayer of thanksgiving. Amen.