

## The Last of the Old-Time Prophets

They were cousins, born just six months apart, but their lives were very different. One grew up the son of a priest; the other was raised the son of a carpenter. One was the long-awaited product of two people who thought they'd never have a child; the other's birth was unexpected and initially not too well received. One was a prophet in the old tradition, in the mold of an Elijah, a Samuel, a Moses; the other lived a mostly unremarkable life, at least for the first three decades. One died by the whim of a hedonistic old man and a silly girl; the other was assassinated by a weak governor and the fear of his own people. One was known as a wild man; the other has a reputation of being mild-mannered, but that's not entirely so. One was widely recognized as one who had come from God; the other was rarely acknowledged as who he really was. One was named "God is gracious"; the other's name means "the Lord is salvation".

The two boys had a great deal in common, as well. Their mothers were first cousins. They both were touched by God in amazing ways. Their conceptions were heralded by messages from God, by dreams and visions, by disbelief and acceptance. God chose each of their names. Their lives were marked by extraordinary gifts and the power of God, and both served Israel, God's people, by proclaiming God's goodness and declaring that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. They both came to the attention of both the Jewish and the secular authorities of their time, and both eventually died for their faith. These cousins were named John and Jesus.

John was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, born late in their lives, after they'd given up on having a child. They came from a long line of priests and servants of God; in fact, it was

during his time in the Temple that the angel appeared to Zechariah to announce the birth of his son. There was no question, right from the start, that this would be a special child; his father was struck mute until he was able to confirm that against all tradition, the child would not be named after his father Zechariah nor given the name of an ancestor, but instead would be called John: God is gracious. There at John's dedication in the Temple, everyone present heard that God had intervened in Zechariah's, Elizabeth's, and John's lives. Even before that, when his mother's cousin Mary, newly pregnant, came to visit Elizabeth, the infant John stirred in his mother's womb in recognition that Mary's child, too, was especially touched by God.

By the time John's cousin, Jesus, began to make his name known among the Jews, John already had a following of committed disciples, and a reputation for being a prophet. He even looked the part: dressed in camel's hair, eating locusts and honey, wandering through the wilderness with word of the Kingdom of God at hand and the coming of the Lord. John was, in fact, the last of the old-time prophets.

Back in the day, as they say, prophets of God had quite a reputation. Often they were thought to be "not quite right", which is a polite way to say that they often behaved erratically. Once Samuel had located Saul to be the first king of Israel, Saul had to confirm that he could be a prophet: the test looks to our twenty-first century eyes like a seizure of some sort. Prophets often were people called to live apart, in the wilderness, as John did, and like Elijah who was fed by ravens during one long wilderness ramble, the prophets lived by what God provided: manna, locusts, honey. The Old Testament prophets helped people understand the will of God and often called them back to right living, to God's word, to wholeness and holiness.

John had a message that people were ready to hear: the Lord is coming! The Kingdom of heaven is near! Repent and be baptized! The oppressed Jews looked forward eagerly to the coming Messiah, and many listened to what John had to say. His teaching was firmly anchored in their religious traditions: the prophets had long proclaimed the coming day of the Lord and the need to order one's life after the teaching of God. John was speaking their language, and they understood what he had to say. Even baptism, that practice which earned John his nickname, the Baptist or my favorite, John the Baptizer, was not new to the Jews. Instead, it was a frequent practice used to mark atonement for sin and a renewed and purified spirit, to show that one who had been unclean was made ritually clean again.

John was an inspired preacher, one in whom could clearly be seen the power of God. After all, who would live like him, out in the wilderness? Who would dress like him, in camel's hair carelessly belted? Who would eat like him, locusts and honey, crunchy and sweet? And his words resonated in their hearts: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!" "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." John brought a forewarning: God was going to break into the world, and everything was going to change.

John was the last of the old breed, the prophets whose closeness to God drove them away from everyone else, into the wilderness, even sometimes into madness and despair. John has a last word from God: the kingdom is at hand; everything must change. Everything. Even how God communicates with his people. Even how they understood judgment and mercy, grace and hope.

The law had been smothered, abused, twisted, overanalyzed, and feared until it no longer pointed people to the graciousness of God. Well-intentioned men had tried to "help"

people follow the law and to understand it, and in so doing had layered their own thoughts over it so thickly that God's graciousness could barely be found in it. What was intended to point God's people to God's grace had become less a beacon showing the way, and more of a maze with a nearly impossible solution.

As the last of the Old Time Prophets, John was the people's last hope to find God in the law and the teachings they had received. Over the centuries, these layers of interpretation had been added to the law, so that what God intended to be a reflection of his grace became an obstacle to people's perception of the love and grace of God. This is the message of John: God is gracious, and this is why he had such strong words first for the Pharisees and Sadducees, and then for anyone who thought that resting on their Jewish heritage would guarantee them a place in heaven: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume 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. Even now the axe 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.'

Hard words. Harsh words. Judging and condemning words, from the one whom God himself named, "God is gracious." So hard to imagine, hard to understand. It's even harder to understand how John's message could be what God wanted him to say when we think about his cousin Jesus, just a few months younger than John. Jesus, whom God called "The Lord is salvation," is the one we associate with God's graciousness, and John is the one who preached repentance and salvation with fire and with brimstone.

Even though the nation of Israel knew themselves to be God's own people, John told them that being children of Abraham was not enough; that if they relied on their heritage alone, their ethnicity, their country of origin, they will not find the way to the kingdom of heaven. The old ways don't seem to be working, not as God intended. They were meant to help people get to know God, so that when they followed the scriptures and "hid God's word in their hearts," they would know God was with them. Instead, some people use the law as a checklist: done this...check. Done that...check. Love is not that complicated; we know this, and God's love is not that complicated either. God's people were lost and confused, and feeling separate from God at a time when they really needed to feel God's presence. So John preached about repentance and baptized people, knowing that everything was about to change, that Jesus, his cousin, Mary's son, would change everything. "One who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals."

Jesus. Conceived by an unmarried girl and the Holy Spirit. Adopted in an act of sheer grace by Joseph, who had every right to make Mary an outcast. Raised the son of a carpenter, most likely a carpenter himself, we know very little about Jesus prior to the beginning of his public ministry, when he was about 30. And what we know then is that one of the first things Jesus did was to go to John for baptism. What did John have that Jesus didn't? Why would Jesus do such a thing?

Although the cousins have much in common, here's where the differences really matter. John is the last of his kind, a prophet trying to use familiar language and concepts, familiar words and ideas, to convince people to repent, to rethink, to turn their lives around. In John, God is making one last attempt at doing things the "old way", a way the Jews have a

relationship with and can understand. But they don't get it. They just don't. Although John has many followers, so many that even Herod felt threatened and others wondered if Jesus shouldn't just join him, he is unable to rally the nation to repentance in the way Old Testament did.

John and Jesus' meeting marks the turning point for God and God's people, a moment when people first have an opportunity to see that God is with them, that the Lord is salvation, that God is at once universal and personal, that God is indeed gracious. Jesus' coming will bring into being a new way for people to have a relationship with God that is personal and individual, even as they are also corporately in relationship with God as part of the Body which is the Church. Everything changes with Jesus.

John's preaching may be reminiscent to us of a big-city street preacher, the ones we see on TV shows and movies about New York and Chicago. You know the ones I mean: standing on the street corner with a sign saying, "The end is near." That's part of John's message: the end is near. Everything must change. But we do ourselves and John a disservice if we think that's all he had to say. John and Jesus have essentially the same message: to grow closer to God, to know that you are loved by God, you must repent and be forgiven.

John speaks that message to a world and a people where might made right, where fear and oppression were the order of the day, where preserving the established religious ways and the law as interpreted by the rabbis was upheld over the hope and grace and knowing the love of God. And the end is near for John: hope for an end to oppression, to suffering, to the abuse of power. The end is near in the coming of the Kingdom of God, which has broken into the world in Jesus Christ, who proclaimed, "Behold, I make all things new." But the message is the

same for both John and Jesus: to take part in the Kingdom of Heaven, we must examine ourselves, repent of our wrongdoing, forgive, and accept forgiveness. Then we will have heard both the last of the old-time prophets and the Son of God speak to us of grace and salvation, of peace and judgment, of forgiveness and hope.

This second week of Advent, our Advent candle stands as a symbol of hope, and despite his harsh words, that is the message brought to us by John the Baptist. He phrases it in the language of the old-time, Old Testament prophets, of whom he is the last; in language of judgment and condemnation, in words that frighten us and rightly so, for they speak of the end for those who do not repent, who do not forgive, who do not know the love and grace of God. It is hard for us to find hope in John's preaching, yet here it is: "One who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to carry his sandals."

Past the harsh words, past the condemnation, there is hope, Advent light, the promise of Christ's coming and of the Kingdom of Heaven. And in that kingdom, the trees bear good fruit and so are not cut down. In that heaven, the wheat is gathered into the granary and so preserved and kept. John comes at it with a sense of urgency, and rightly so: it is a matter of life and death...but let us hear, let us remember, let us cling to the hope: the Kingdom of heaven has come near! Repent, remember, and rejoice!