

John the Baptist in Darkness

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Text: Luke 1:76, 78; 3:4-17, Matthew 11:2-6

John the Baptist knew what he had to do. It was a big job, a job that was set for him before he was born. When he was a baby, his father Zechariah said about him "...for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." (Luke 1:76) We can only imagine the conversations John had with his parents, as they told him his purpose in life. He knew what he had to do. But how was he going to do it? How do you go about getting a big message across to a big group of people? That's where John faced a murky path, a dark path. What road to take to do this?

Going to where the people were would have been logical for John. I am sure that at some point he thought, "I'll go to Jerusalem, I'll speak in the Temple, I'll try to get my message out there to as many people as possible." After all Jerusalem was the mecca...tens of thousands of Jews came there to celebrate on religious holy days. "Go to where the people are." That would have been the logical path.

Think of a modern-day prophet, a popular evangelist. He has a big message about Christ that he wants a lot of people to hear. He tries to get as big an audience as possible. That's why he goes on TV, so his message can be heard by millions of people at the same time, and he publishes books, and goes on speaking tours. When he comes to Edmonton, he doesn't rent the Lendrum Community League hall, he rents the Rexall Centre and tries to get lots of people to come and hear his big message.

Going to the temple would have been the obvious path for John, but we have no record of him ever speaking in the temple in Jerusalem. Instead, John took a different path, a dark road that initially seemed to be ridiculous. Imagine some great TV evangelist moving to a little sod hut on the edge of Great Slave Lake. Not even a paved road. An evangelist in the wilderness wearing only bearskins, eating fish and blackberries. That's a dark path!

In John's case he did exactly that...he went wild! He dressed in camel skin clothing, and lived off the land, a diet of locusts and honey. He headed to the wilderness, where there are no people, in order to get his big message out to a lot of people. It doesn't seem to make sense!

What John did was unusual, but it was not unknown. He was acting like Elijah acted...we hear in 2 Kings 1 about Elijah living in the wilderness, wearing camel skin clothing. John adopted a form that people understood.

Imagine if today a politician in India campaigned for justice for the poor, and he only wore a white homespun piece of cloth wrapped around himself. Politicians don't wear things like that today, it's outlandish. But it would remind everyone who saw him of Mahatma Gandhi. The message of the contemporary politician would be connected to the message of the great Gandhi.

It was the same with John. He dresses and lives like Elijah, he talks about repentance. He is a "voice crying in the wilderness". There was something so compelling about John's presence, about his message, that big crowds of people trekked out into the wilderness to listen to John speak.

John chose a dark path, but he saw the resolution of that path, he saw that it led to success. John was wildly successful, his message drew thousands, who repented and were baptized. Everyone knew John. He was so famous that even kings in palaces heard about him. John was so famous that there are historical records about John the Baptist outside Christian scripture. Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian, wrote about John fifty years after John died, and his account of John's message is accurate. Fifty years later people were still talking about him, still remembering his words.

But John faced another period of darkness. John spoke forcefully to Herod, denouncing him to his face for his immoral behaviour. John was then imprisoned by Herod. We know from scripture that John faced doubts in prison, because some of his words from prison are recorded. The fact that John ended up in prison at all might have surprised him. While there were predictions about Jesus having to suffer, John's mother Elizabeth received no warning that "a sword will pierce your own soul also." Being in prison was a dark time for John...he wondered whether Jesus was really the Messiah.

You see John had described who Jesus would be, he said he was going to be like an axe at the foot of the unfruitful tree; "His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:10-12) That was John's vision of the Messiah.

Even in prison, John was keeping track of Jesus, he had reports about him. Matthew 11:2-6 tells us, "When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' He sends his disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come?" Those are pointed words. John predicted what Jesus would do, and now Jesus was here and not doing it. Somehow,

Jesus wasn't living up to John's expectations. So he sends words that ask, "When are you going to do what you are called to do?" Jesus answers John's disciples. 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.'" In other words, Jesus tells him, "I am doing my father's work. This is my father's work." And Jesus adds the equally pointed words, "And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

I wonder about that last line. Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me. I wonder whether John was tempted to be frustrated with Jesus. Jesus wasn't being the Saviour he expected. Yes, Jesus was doing good things. But he was helping people one at a time...he wasn't coming with political power and might. He wasn't taking charge of the temple. He wasn't the Saviour John expected.

I also wonder whether John was expecting Jesus to rescue him. If Jesus was coming with power, why didn't he use the power he had to get John out of prison? Why wasn't he meeting with Herod and the other rulers and denouncing them, calling them to repentance? Maybe John expected that Jesus would get him out of prison, and they would work together. Together, they might turn the people of Israel back to God!

John was still waiting and wondering about Jesus the night of the party, when Herod's soldiers came to his cell to execute him. John's life ended in the dark of prison, in the dark of not knowing what was coming next. John's path was a faithful path, but it was a dark path, where he faced disappointment, and where he didn't understand everything that was happening. And it wasn't John's fault. He didn't have the opportunity to spend a lot of time with Jesus, to grasp his message. John was being as faithful as he could be, but he was called to walk a dark path.

I was reading this week about another man who went through a period of darkness...a man from our own time. His name was Henri Nouwen. Like John the Baptist, Henri had his work cut out for him from an early age. As a young boy he knew he was going to be a priest. As he grew older and had a knack for learning, eventually he became a professor. His classes at Harvard and Yale were filled to overflowing. His books were bestsellers, people couldn't get enough of them. And everyone wanted to hear him speak: he packed lecture halls around the world wherever he went. And all his teaching and all his writing were about God and the love of God, and following God's leading. He was a powerful, successful prophetic voice. As far as theologians go, he was a star. He is considered by many to be one of the great spiritual lights of the twentieth century.

Right smack dab in the midst of all his success, Henri was filled with doubts. "Is this where God wants me to be? Am I listening to God's voice?" And he listened and listened and eventually through discussions with his friend Jean Vanier, he heard a call to become a

pastor to a small L'Arche community in Toronto. L'Arche communities are group homes for people with mental and physical challenges. The philosophy of L'Arche is that everyone lives together in small communities, core members and those who care for them. Well, you can't get much farther away from Harvard than a group home in a suburb of Toronto. At L'Arche Henri, like the other people in the community, was involved in day-to-day care-giving. It was his job to physically care for Adam, a severely mentally and physically challenged adult. Henri was away from the limelight, away from the adoring crowds...and Henri wasn't initially particularly good at caregiving, and Adam let him know that. Adam was not at all impressed by Henri's academic credentials, he didn't care that Henri had written award-winning books or that Henri was famous.

In this setting Henri lived, but he also suffered. It was hard work, he missed the crowds who would listen to his every word. Yet he knew God had called him to this place. Henri slipped into a deep depression that lasted for months. He couldn't even drag himself out of his room. The people he had come to minister to, ministered to him. Gradually he emerged again, stronger and full of faith, and it was at this point he was hit by a car while crossing the street, and he suffered serious physical injuries. Again he was the one receiving care. He gradually regained his health, participating in the worshipping community of L'Arche, care-giving and doing some writing. And then, he suddenly died of a heart attack at the age of 65.

From most people's perspective, Henri was at his best teaching and preaching to thousands, the star of Yale and Harvard. But God called him to step away, to work in the darkness, to take a different road. A road away from fame and fortune, a humble road, a road to obscurity, a road to genuine caring, a road to being weak and vulnerable, a road to death. It was a dark and difficult road, but it was the faithful road for Henri.

Today we enter the season of advent, the season where we remember how God sent the light of Jesus into the world. I can guess that many people here hope that this Christmas will be filled with warm family times, with spiritual insight into the gift of a saviour, our hearts overflowing in loving acts for people we meet. We try to walk a faithful path. We want a clear light-filled road ahead. We want certainty and joy and hope. God willing, some of us will have that!

But for John the Baptist, and for Henri Nouwen, and for many faithful people, faithfulness takes them on a murky path. John's earthly path ended in the darkness of a prison, standing in front of a man with a sword. For Henri, his path involved giving up almost everything he knew he was good at, and taking a different direction, into relative obscurity, where he was often confused and bewildered. But these were faithful paths.

Perhaps this advent, you are walking a dark path. Maybe it's a season of grief, where you are face to face with loss. Or family conflict happens, or we face a health crisis. Or in our spiritual lives, we can find ourselves confused and questioning, we wonder whether we have ever really grasped who Jesus is. What if Jesus isn't the Saviour we thought he was? Or perhaps you are facing a crossroads, and you feel God nudging you in a new direction, a path that is full of unknowns, a path you are scared to take. There are many reasons why you might feel you are walking a dark path this Christmas.

The Christmas story with its gift of a baby and happy angels and kneeling shepherds can lead us to think peaceful and happy thoughts. If we're not on that wavelength we can feel alienated and isolated. But the Christmas story has a dark side...there is a king in Jerusalem in the background of this picture, waiting for the baby to be born, waiting with soldiers. Elizabeth and Mary were ecstatic at the birth of their baby boys, but they faced unknowns about the future of their sons.

What I am trying to say here is that it's OK if you are walking a dark path right now in the season of Christmas. It doesn't mean you are failing, or losing your faith. Even the most faithful people go through periods of darkness where they don't know why they are where they are, or even what to believe in. I hope that we can be a community where people can speak honestly about their lives. And that as we listen to each other, we refrain from judging even when people's stories are beyond our understanding or beyond our comfort zone. We can listen with compassion as people describe the path they are on. Blessed are they who take no offence.

Zechariah, John's father, spoke prophetic words about his baby son, words that I am sure John himself knew. I wonder whether they gave him hope in his last dark days in prison. These prophetic words are our hope in darkness, words of salvation, words to hold onto in the darkest times.

Luke 1: 78 By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

John: I am John, a Prophet of Jahweh. Called by God to speak to you today. I light this candle as a sign of the coming Messiah. [lights candle]

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 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. 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.’

Voice from the crowd: ‘What then should we do?’

John: ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’

Tax collector: I’m a tax collector, Teacher, what should I do?

John: Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.

Soldiers: And we soldiers, what should we do?’

John: ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’

‘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. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.’