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Mal 3:1

Ps 71:1-8

Jo 1:6-9

Preparing the Way: The Mysticism of John the Baptist

A HA! When was the last time you had an A-Ha moment? A time when you discovered a truth of which you were so certain, you exclaimed with both your voice and body, A HA!

It's not all that common. And some people may express it differently: with different words, Yes! Or different gestures...[clenched fists above head...]

Whatever the form, one thing remains the same: whenever we have an A-Ha moment, we experience a certainty so profound we unselfconsciously acknowledge it with our bodies. There is a visceral certainty to our insight. We know it is true in our mind and our body.

This is the closest I've come to understanding the person and the faith of John the Baptist. He experienced an A-Ha moment that inspired his life and ministry of preaching.

In many Christian circles tomorrow, June 24 is the day which commemorates the birth of John the Baptist. In the Catholic tradition he's one of only two saints for whom there are feast days set aside to celebrate a birthday (the other being the nativity of Mary on September 8). This makes him pretty special, and yet truth be told, until a couple weeks ago, I never really thought much of John the Baptist. And when I started asking folks what they thought of him, the usual

answer was: not much....”he’s a little fuzzy to me,” said one friend. Another acquaintance remarked, “Is that the dude who ate locusts and honey? Whoa.”

I admit, I agree. Locusts and honey don’t really charge up or feed my faith.

He may be an important figure in the Christian tradition, but it can be challenging to find a way to make him approachable...for me, it has been challenging to understand how he fits in with my faith.

I certainly had heard about John the Baptist, the preacher, “the one crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord.” I had seen Martin Scorsese’s film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and found the depiction of John intellectually interesting: a charismatic preacher who brought followers into a frenzied state. As a historian, I find this stuff fascinating. But as a person of faith? Not so much. I haven’t been sure how to incorporate that charismatic frenzy into my own faith.

Then there’s the way John died. I love going to art museums, so I had seen lots of paintings depicting his beheading or the presentation of his head on a platter. Usually I turned away as fast as I could. I may be willing to get up close to study painting technique, but as a point of faith, again, I wasn’t moved to want to get to close this part of the story.

I knew the story of him leaping in his mother’s womb when he heard Mary speak, but that passage precedes the Magnificat in the book of Luke and my attention always jumped ahead to the beautiful lines, “My soul magnifies the Lord....”

So while I was aware of John's existence in the Christian story, I can't say I ever really thought about him in terms of what he meant for my faith. I never took the time to reflect on him or to find meaning in his life for my faith. Until a couple of weeks ago when I submitted the Scripture passages and sermon title for today.

I thought this exercise would be good for me.

And it has been.

First I turned to doing some research, since that's what I am most comfortable with. [I've compiled a partial list of passages where John the Baptist appears in Scripture. You'll find it inserted into your Bulletin.]

What we know factually about John is rather slim.

We know that he was born to older parents Elizabeth and Zachariah, and he was just slightly older than his cousin Jesus. Between the years 27-29 C.E., or the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, John was inspired by the word of God and became an itinerant preacher with a message of baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. John was imprisoned and executed by the emperor Herod but the reasons for this vary. In Scripture, (Mk 6:14-29) John is beheaded for his criticism of Herod's marriage Herodias who was Herod's niece as well as his brother's former wife. But a contemporary historian, Josephus, links the execution to Herod's fear of rebellion. So understanding details of John's life are, as my friend said, somewhat "fuzzy."

In continuing my research I learned that the words used by the Gospel writer known as Luke are almost identical to those used by writers in the ascetic sect known as the Essenes living

in Qumran. Both refer to a prophet as [the] voice of one crying out in the desert, “prepare the way of the Lord.” Some people think John was a member of the Essenes.

And finally, he is said in the Christian Scriptures to have recognized Jesus when Jesus arrived at the River Jordan and that John baptized Jesus, knowing fully who he was.

These are just a few of the many glimpses of this figure known as John the Baptist from sources dating to around the time he lived. Some pieces are factual; some are open to interpretation.

Later writers would amplify his personal profile, making him understandable to later contemporaries.

He is described in the Koran as a man bestowed with wisdom, grace, and purity, who grew up to be a righteous man, who honored his parents and was neither arrogant nor rebellious. (*Koran*, Penguin edition, p. 215) .

And still many centuries later in the 1400s, one writer wrote, “John was a school of virtue, a master of living, a form of holiness, a rule of righteousness, a mirror of virginity, an example of chastity, a way of penance, a forgiveness of sins, a teaching of faith. John is more than a man, equal to angels, the sum of the law, the beginning of the Gospel, the voice of the apostles, the silence of prophets, the light of the world...and the midpoint of the blessed Trinity.” (Claire Waters, *Virgins and Scholars*, p. 71) This writer has amplified what he knew from Scripture to meet the needs of his audience. That is to make John the Baptist understandable to his audience.

How easy it was for a medieval writer to make their subjects so accessible, so knowable, and so approachable to their audiences.

Today, I sometimes wonder if we are so stymied by our love of facts, that we turn over the responsibility of story telling to experts: either scholars or artists or poets...professionals in their studies and arts...so that we don't have to get close to making our faith our own through creating stories that make figures like John relevant.

Who is John the Baptist? And how is he relevant to us in our faith? It's really up to each of us to answer these questions.

It's true that there is an art to hagiography, or telling the story of a saint. It is an art that allows for truths that may not be factual. These are spiritual truths that speak to a generation or a single person. While it is, in our present awareness of intellectual integrity, always prudent and essential to acknowledge when one is creating hagiography rather than analytically researched biography, the art form of understanding and creating awareness of human holiness is a spiritual gift...

a spiritual gift that I believe is available to each of us if we open ourselves to it.

My own understanding of John the Baptist in these last few weeks has shifted once my intention in facing the texts shifted. Once I decided to create my own awareness of John's holiness so that I could convey that to you, I faced the texts in a different way.

First I narrowed them down to one:

I determined that the most compelling passage about John for me was found early on when he leapt within his mother's womb at the sound of Mary's voice. After reading the passage

from Luke 1: 39-45 a few times, I began to retell the story in my own words. Mary traveled to the hills of Judea to visit her cousin. She knocked on the door and said, “Hello...anyone home? It’s me, Mary.” At the moment Elizabeth heard Mary’s voice, she stopped what she was doing and her baby in her womb leapt. Elizabeth felt a chill run down her back and she knew she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She ran to the door and hugged Mary. Still holding Mary by the shoulders, Elizabeth beamed, with tears running down her face, “Oh it’s so good to see you! As soon as I heard your voice, my baby leapt in my womb. Blessings to you and blessings to your baby in you, too! To really get into the story, I even started acting out some of the gestures these women must have used and shared; a hug; gently holding their stomachs full of life; tears of joy; biting their lips in fear or uncertainty; laughing when the baby leapt....

Yes, my version is a little different from the canonical Scripture that you’ll read. But when I sit with that passage and reflect on how this was lived out, this is what it looks like to me. Two pregnant women, greeting one another, thrilled to see one another, flush with the joy of life inside of them. And for at least one moment for Mary, not overcome with fear. Instead, she learns that the baby inside her cousin has leapt upon hearing her voice.

And this brings me to the crux of my understanding of John. He experienced faith in his body. He leapt. Even in the womb, he experienced that A-Ha certainty.

After he was born, he may have experienced doubt, but he preached with conviction. He spoke about his faith without arrogance, but with passion. His certainty came from his visceral awareness, his visceral certainty already in the womb of the One who would be the messiah.

Such visceral awareness feels to me to be a form of mysticism. Scholar Bernard McGinn defines mysticism as the awareness of the presence of the Divine. John experienced this

awareness already in the womb and took this certainty with him as he continued to experience this truth through his life.

Last week as I was still searching around wondering what the key was to understanding John, I asked a librarian at the GTU what she thought of John. She smiled, and with a pause only long enough to reveal real reflection, she said, “Ah, John the Baptist. He had unusual courage. He had the courage to stand up for his beliefs in a time when it was dangerous.”

With these words, she helped me understand John the Baptist for the first time. There is a calm and peace filled certainty, not infused with arrogance, but filled with the Holy Spirit that is born from a visceral certainty of Truth. That visceral certainty that caused him to leap while still in the womb.

e.e.cummings wrote “To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best night and day to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting.”

To be yourself...filled with conviction, understanding, without arrogance, takes a special capacity.

John’s leap is an indication to me that he had this capacity already in the womb.

I had read and heard that passage over and over again, but only in recent days have I allowed myself to enter into the story enough to make it my own and discover the profound teaching it offers: What a wonderful tradition we have that celebrates the certainty of faith experienced by an infant still in the womb...the certainty of faith that was expressed by an infant leaping for joy.

So tomorrow on the feast day of John the Baptist's birthday I will consider him in a new light. Rather than celebrating with somber prayer or locusts and honey, I think I may just take to the air and leap with joy! What better way is there to remember John the Baptist and to celebrate once again finding a faith I can call my own.

And as I often do, I will end with a question to you: how will you celebrate John the Baptist's birthday?

That is a story only you can tell.

That is a faith only you can live.

Some Passages related to John the Baptist

Compiled by Darleen Pryds

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Mk 6: 14-29 Herod fears Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead; recounting why Herod had John beheaded

Lk 1:5-25 An angel visits Elizabeth and Zechariah

Lk 1:36-37 Elizabeth conceives in old age: nothing is impossible for God

Lk 1: 39-45 John leaps in Elizabeth's womb

Lk 1: 57-66 Birth of John

Lk 1:80 The child grew strong in spirit

Lk 3: 1-20 John preaching and baptizing in the desert

Lk 7:18-23 Messengers from John go to Jesus: Are you the one?

Lk 7: 24-35 What Jesus says about John: a prophet

Lk 9:7-9 What Herod says of John

Jo 1: 6-18 John comes to testify to the Light, but is not the Light

Jo 1: 19-28 John says "I am the voice of one crying in the desert"

Jo 1: 29-34 John sees Jesus and says, "Behold the Lamb of God."