

# The Sign of Healing

sermon digest

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Isaiah 61:1-2; Matthew 11:2-6

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John the Baptizer is a colorful personality we revisit every year during the season of Advent; and we may actually not be too far off the mark in doing so. Only two of the Gospels have stories related to Jesus' birth—the only two places in Christian scripture to speak of Jesus' birth other than Paul's saying he was "born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4). Yet all four of the Gospels introduce the story of Jesus with the story of John. Why? Maybe it is because he was a prominent relative. Yet two of the Gospels (Matthew and Mark) don't seem to have any knowledge of a family connection between John and Jesus at all. It could be because there was some rivalry between the disciples of John and Jesus, and the Gospels are trying to establish a clear relationship. Indeed, the Gospels do indicate that some of John's disciples were among the first to respond to Jesus. It could be to establish John as a vital link in establishing Jesus' relationship to the hopes and expectations of the people Israel. Whatever the Gospels' purpose (and it could be all of the above), the story of the Baptizer speaks volumes about how our preconceptions color our ability to grasp who this Jesus is and where we should look in the world to find him today.

John is cast as a prophet. He dresses like Elijah, and he sounds like Isaiah or Amos. Matthew and Mark paint him as the embodiment of Isaiah 40:3: "A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD." His message is harsh, anticipating not just a judgment of pruning away bad wood, but cutting the tree off at its roots. And then his honesty brings him at cross purposes with a philandering Herod and lands him in jail where he languishes throughout the entirety of Jesus' public ministry. We often come upon the question he sends to Jesus—"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"—and psychologize the situation. We identify with John's sense of discouragement in his interminable waiting. Yes, he was sure at one point. Matthew says he recognized Jesus as the one who was to come and with a show of humility, baptized him in the Jordan. Who could blame him if after being cut short in his own ministry and left to rot in Herod's dungeon, he needs some reassurance? Wouldn't we? As a matter of fact, don't we? Given our own personal disappointments as well as our frustration on looking around and seeing injustice, warfare and evil thriving in the world, don't we voice our own doubts—at least within ourselves?

Interestingly enough, Matthew seems to be telling us that something more is at stake here. According to Matthew, John's doubts, arise specifically at the point where he hears "what the Messiah [is] doing." And what has Jesus been doing that would cause John's consternation? Just in case John's disciples haven't been watching and listening closely enough, Jesus reaches back and summarizes his work in keeping with the hopes voiced by none other than the prophet Isaiah: "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 offense at me."

Who could possibly take offense at such good news? Who other than one who had pictured it all differently? Who other than one who had rubbed his hands in glee at the thought of seeing evil finally get its comeuppance? Jesus, it seems, did not match up point-for-point with John's expectations. "Jesus," Mary Hinkle Shore suggests, "is more interested in healing than torching, more interested in raising the dead than smiting the wicked" [*Pilgrim Preaching*, December 12, 2004]. We can understand how John got it wrong or at least how he would come to the point of needing some clarification. The more important question, however, is how do we get it wrong? Where do we look to determine if the Christ has come? Where do we look to find evidence of his works in our day?

Are we like a pouting little Jonah, crawling into a safe vantage point where we can comfortably sit and watch a firestorm of judgment being rained down upon those we deem the unrighteous of our world? Do we steel ourselves against the suffering of others by assuring ourselves that their plight is, after all, their own fault? We can look at the suffering of those in extreme poverty and cluck to ourselves "if they only had fewer children." We can hurt for the millions suffering with AIDS but quietly remind ourselves that they made their own beds. We can feel sympathy for the long term unemployed, all the while insisting that we should not, after all, make unemployment too comfortable for them. We can stand back and observe Arab killing Arab and say to ourselves that they have been doing that for millennia. They are, after all, Arabic.

Those temptations certainly pull at all of us. We do become weary and we come to points at which we just want to wash our hands of troubling and complex situations. Someone said to me a few weeks ago that she comes to the point of feeling so overwhelmed with the suffering in the world that she just steps back from it all and seeks to find some peace of mind within herself. Isn't this, after all, why Jesus came? To give

us peace of mind?

Yes and no. Jesus, the certainly came to bring peace, but the peace he brings is more like the love of God he imparts in our lives—not for the purpose of being dammed up and held captive as if it is our own private stash, but to be shared. Jesus, you see, transforms our expectations of who Messiah is and what he should be. Rather than expecting too much, we tend to give up and expect to little. There is absolutely no way, we tell ourselves, that we can deal with all of the suffering and need that is out there. The only way we can deal with it is just to lower our expectations and to hope that our faith will give us a little comfort and maybe enable us to do a little good.

And yet, much as he does in recounting the Parable of the Last Judgment, Matthew places Jesus in the midst of those in great need. Do you want to know who Messiah is and what he does? Look around you for this telling evidence, Jesus tells us. Look for those moments and those places where “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.” Look around and find the creative power of God at work through heroic and yet often very ordinary servants of God and join your lives to theirs and to God’s as you become an instrument of hope and healing in a troubled world.

My friend Anita Henderlite did this a few years ago as she joined her efforts with some of the lost boys of Sudan to build schools in Southern Sudan. She waits now with baited breath as does the rest of the world to see if hopes for self-determination in that troubled region triumphs over oppression and want. Please keep that troubled region in your consciousness and prayers.

A small band of Christians did it three decades ago when they decided that their citizenship should be a matter of faithful stewardship, and they began Bread for the World to seek to address hunger at home and abroad by offering their letters and influence to assure more just and compassionate national policies.

Heifer International, Habitat for Humanity, Aid to Distressed Families of Appalachian Counties, Church World Service—the list goes on and on. If you want to find the Christ, look for where people are hurting and find those who are delivering hope. For there you have it. If you want to know where the Christ is, the best sign you can find and the best sign you yourself can be is found in the healing of his hurting children.