

The Opening Act

John the Baptizer and the new thing he creates

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Texts: *John 1:6-8, 19-28*

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The Opening Act

The vivid opening to the Gospel According to John

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
²He was in the beginning with God.

It begins at the beginning of everything and declares that **He** was there. The He that the evangelist calls the Word. He was there with GOD.

The evangelist we call John begins his telling of the good news of Jesus Christ by locating Jesus in the beginning of everything. *In the beginning was the Word* it says. Not *in the beginning of this story* but *in the beginning of everything!*

This grand opening to John is prologue to the book's first action. The narrative shifts to a different character. Not the Word. The one who would point to the Word. One we were introduced to last week, and doing pretty much the same thing he was doing last week. He's baptizing people in a river. They call him John the Baptizer. And people are coming to him, to hear him, and to be cleansed.

In reading this text every year, I've never truly asked myself why John is doing this. I've wondered about baptism, curious about what it is exactly that John is doing and how it relates to what we do. And yet something about this story has stuck in the back of my mind like a cat digging into an afghan, refusing to be removed. Something doesn't sit right with me.

And then I start to ask myself why this matters: why it always sticks with me. And this line of questioning leads me to a place I was trying **not** to go. I was embarrassed by the fact that I was never sure what baptism meant to Jewish people two thousand years ago. I didn't know if they even did it. More specifically, whether or not they did baptism like **this**. Like what John is doing.

What was gnawing on me was this idea that something important was happening here, but we are all blind to it. We're too busy thinking about baptism as we know it. We impose our understanding of baptism onto this story, which means that we aren't paying much attention to what is really happening.

A Different Baptism

This is what I do know.

Water and baptism were used for ritual purification. When people lost their ritual purity, either through touching something they weren't supposed to, eating something they weren't supposed to, or they

had their monthly menstruation, the person would become “unclean” and would need to be made clean again through a ritual of washing and immersion.

To do this, people would see a priest at the Temple. They would also be expected to make a sacrifice to GOD. Then they could be washed of their impurity.

We can hear these concepts as echoes in our understanding of baptism, can't we? But this isn't about the hypothetical sins that we may have committed or that later concept called original sin, with our being absolved once and for all, but those physical acts which deprive us of our purity, and the routine exercising of repenting, sacrificing, and washing. The focus is different. It is ritual, physical, and repeatable. It isn't metaphysical. It isn't babies vs. adults. It isn't about heaven and hell. It isn't about creating the concept of purgatory to keep babies out of hell. It is about relationship with GOD: being right with GOD and *restoring* that relationship.

Why the story matters

So, here's why I have come to think the story matters.

The Pharisees come up to John the Baptizer and they're like

What do you think you're doing?

And John is all

What does it look like? I'm in the middle of baptizing people.

And they say

But who said you could? You didn't go to seminary. You weren't ordained by a bishop.

And John's response is

Well, GOD, man. It's GOD.

John is on the **other side** of the river from Jerusalem, where the Temple is. I think this has deep resonance with his action: that he is putting himself on the other side from the Temple leadership. He's doing these unsanctioned baptisms, without the blood sacrifice of animals, and without his being a priest. The Pharisees say that they would be OK with this if they actually thought John were the Messiah, but they don't think he is anyway. They just seem interested in nailing him for these outlaw baptisms: these unlicensed ritual purifications. Today, we would call this seeking ecclesiastical discipline.

This is the telling theme of the wider story: these people are unable to see GOD in their midst, because they are too busy focusing on the imperfections of this religious weirdo. They want to trap him and have him punished. But they can't see that GOD is actually doing a new thing here.

John messes with them (and with us) with his response. It is cryptic.

Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.

John is breaking the rules, declaring GOD's purifying grace upon the repentant, and bringing the people's awareness to the Messiah who is not so much as coming: the Messiah is already here! *He is in the crowd. He is standing right beside you. He says to them. Next to him, I am nothing.*

Into the Wilds

John is doing a new thing. He is transforming how people relate to ritual purification, saying this isn't about the person or the location: it is on you. Do you repent? Do you seek to actually **become** different. Do you want something of a do over or a new start? Then come, let's do this. Not with all the visuals and all the fanciness. Not with the exclusionary financial burden of Temple sacrifice. Not at the whim of the leaders. Not in the place where prophets are killed and torture is how things get done. Out here, on the other side of the river. Where things are different.

But what makes it truly different is not the location: out in the wilds: it is John's declaration that the Messiah is there with them.

The messiah is in the wilderness, among the people seeking repentance. He isn't in Jerusalem with the Pharisees. He isn't judging or obsessing over the rules. He isn't kicking out the people who don't follow the rules, which the leaders wrote then enforce. Soon enough **he'll** be breaking those rules to point the *Pharisees* toward GOD's rules.

The messiah is part of the new thing. This crazy, disturbing, countercultural new thing: the thing that is upsetting and troubling to the powerful, but calls out to the people with true authority. This new thing calls them out *into* the wilds. It is calling to us.

Come, come to the river!

Where are our wilds? Where are the places where the Messiah already is? The places where new things are being created. The places where new hope is offered and new repentance is given? That is where the Messiah already is. We are told in our scripture where to look for these places: with those struggling for justice and those scraping enough to eat. With the victims of torture and those in prison. With those who grieve and with those whose work for GOD *increases* when times get hard.

And we have 10 more days to get this place ready. Ten days to build that sense of hope and a renewed culture of repentance and forgiveness. Ten days to rediscover the Bethany-side banks of the Jordan and do a new thing, like rebellious prophets, making straight the way of the Lord.

Our ten days to get right with GOD, building, giving, loving the Christ that is coming, the Messiah already in our midst.