



Epiphany, John the Baptist and Jesus

By John La Boone

“There came a man who was sent from God. His name was John.” – *John 1:6*

It is the Season of Epiphany at last – hallelujah! I love Epiphany. It is my favorite liturgical season by far. I find meaning in all of the seasons in our liturgical calendar but I enjoy Epiphany more than all the others put together. That’s largely a personality thing. I’m just very much at home with having a full season of study, exploration, reflection and quiet contemplation. Traditionally, the church celebrates the Feast of Epiphany to commemorate Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist, and we see that event as the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. It is a time of wonder and of searching for the light of new understanding.

Like many other devoted Episcopalians here in the South, I began life as a Baptist. I have always had special feelings about baptism and John the Baptist. Unsurprisingly, he is a hero in the Baptist denomination. To be more specific, I attended Baptist

Sunday schools but had almost no experience with church worship services in my youth. My parents, who did not attend church at all, felt that Sunday school would cover everything that was spiritually and morally important, so they sent us kids to Sunday school on our own. Looking back, I think I would have liked church services much better than Sunday school classes, but I am thankful for what I got. I was raised on Bible stories that I loved very much, especially those in the Old Testament. I thought it was great when Samson made the temple collapse on the heads of the bad guys. And Joshua bringing down the walls of Jericho. The tender love of Boaz for Ruth. The utter mystery of God creating the world, angels with flaming swords, and all the beautiful poetry of the Psalms. I've always been very much at home in the Hebrew Scriptures where I have found a cornucopia of wisdom, strength, compassion and insight.

Growing up, I loved the New Testament, too, but I found it much more difficult to understand and some parts were pretty scary. Most of the theology went right over my head. I just did what I could to understand the stories, placing them in the context of what was familiar to me. One person I liked a lot in the New Testament was John the Baptist. Being a Baptist, myself, and being named John, I fancied that I had at least a couple things in common with that illustrious, assertive man. I liked that he did his own thing in his own way – you know, wearing camel clothes and a big cowboy belt, eating grasshoppers with wild honey on top. He had style and he certainly stood out from the crowd.



But who exactly was John the Baptist and what part has he played in the story of our faith? Well, for one really big thing, we are told that he baptized Jesus and that momentous event is usually considered the beginning of Jesus' mission to humanity. Our word baptize comes from the Greek *baptisma*, which means to immerse, dip or wash in water. John performed baptisms in the Jordan River that were a visible sign of repentance and renewal. The baptism itself had no supernatural essence. It was not a sacrament. It was just a public demonstration indicating a return to following God's age old commandments and living as a good Jew should. It seems that John was very charismatic and routinely drew huge crowds probably numbering in the hundreds or even the thousands on any given day to hear him preach and to be baptized.

John is written about in all four of the canonical Gospels but with significant differences. They also contain prophetic references supposedly about John drawn from the Old Testament books of Isaiah, Malachi and Exodus and reassembled in a statement about a messenger who is sent ahead or a voice crying in the wilderness. In his nativity story, only found in the Gospel of Luke, we learn that John was the

son of a childless, older couple, the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, both descendants of Aaron, which means both came from priestly families, a reference to John's lineage of holiness. With any Bible stories about an elderly, childless couple, we can expect that they will, indeed, have a child who will grow up to be remarkable and probably render a great service to his people. Several similar stories are found in the Old Testament such as the nativity of the prophet Samuel to which John's story bears a close resemblance.



The conception of John, his name and future mission were personally announced by the Archangel Gabriel to Zechariah while he was offering incense to the LORD in the Temple. Zechariah was struck speechless as a punishment for not immediately believing the angel. Once the child was born, Zechariah obediently wrote out that he would be named John and immediately he regained the power of speech and acquired the gift of prophesy. Then when Elizabeth was about six months pregnant she received a visit from her cousin, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and we are told that at that meeting the fetal John leapt in her womb and Elizabeth said to Mary: Blessed is the fruit of..." That is Luke's signal to the readers that there are important relationships here, but that Jesus is superior to John and Mary is superior to Elizabeth. All this was first written about 40 years after the Crucifixion, so as Christian theology began to develop, was this a way the followers of Jesus tried to get the correct hierarchy of the main characters in the new faith fixed in people's minds?

John was a fiery prophet who gave people an earful. He didn't worry about who he was talking to or about. But he walked the walk as well as talked the talk. He seems to have been almost universally respected by the common people who looked to up to him and believed his words. Noted for his vivid preaching, his message was about the urgent need to repent before God punished Israel as it deserved to be punished. He was a fire and brimstone preacher to say the least. He called people to leave their comforts and concerns and to come out into the desert to face their sins and to turn their lives around. Only in that way could they hope to escape the terrible wrath of God that was surely coming. None of our sources say that he talked about driving out the Romans or setting up a new Jewish state. He had one big message and he stuck to it – repent!

John was a no-nonsense ascetic. He and his disciples fasted as an important part of their devotional program whereas the disciples of Jesus did not. Even though John's story is told in the New Testament, some religious thinkers view him as the last of the Old Testament prophets. The gospel accounts describe the adult John as wearing clothes made of camel hair and eating locusts and wild honey which summons up

images of the prophet Elijah from the ninth century before the Common Era. The traditional belief is that Elijah never died but was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot, and that he will return at the right moment to announce the arrival of the messiah. John was considered a living Jewish prophet during his lifetime who implored his fellow Jews to repent of their sins and return to obeying God's commandments. Those who yearned for signs of the messiah's coming found much to get excited about in John.

Though John and Jesus had much in common, such as preaching the need to repent and reorient, they offered markedly different approaches to personal reform. John was stern, always spouting doom-laden prophecies. Jesus proclaimed the good news of a proper relationship with God and the community with tenderness, hope and joy. Jesus enjoyed socializing and mixing with the crowds, not just preaching at them. Plus, Jesus had a remarkable healing ministry and his powers of exorcism made him famous throughout the region. Neither Jesus nor John paid much attention to the Romans but both came into conflict with the official Jewish religious and political hierarchy. Sometimes Christians get the idea that in the time of Jesus there was one monolithic institution of Judaism dominated by the Temple cult or the Pharisees, and then Jesus came along and challenged the status quo with ideas that no one had ever voiced or even thought of before – which eventually got him killed for rocking the boat. Actually, the boat was already rocking a lot by the time Jesus began his ministry. In first century Palestine, there was a lot going on and some of it was similar in some ways to what Jesus and his disciples were saying and doing. There was an enormous diversity of ideas and many notable charismatic teachers, of which John and Jesus were very remarkable examples. This makes for a fascinating backdrop for the playing out of the Gospel stories.



John has been seen as having a lot in common with a group of ancient Jews called the Essenes who moved out to live separately in a cloistered community by the Dead Sea called Qumran. Famously, they produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. Like John, the Essenes also lived in the wilderness, practiced asceticism, had a restricted diet, followed a rigorous moral code, promoted ritual immersion in water, and had an eschatological worldview, meaning that they avidly speculated about the end times and the world to come. There were a number of other groups in that era that were focused on eschatological ways to see the world around them. Some were politically revolutionary, some were apocalyptic. We have no way to know if John was an Essene or if Jesus was an Essene or a member of one of those other groups, but we can safely say that John and Jesus and the Essenes all shared a similar worldview in a good many senses. John, Jesus and the Essenes were keenly interested in

establishing a new family of humanity within their Jewish identity that was based on sharing mutual support, mutual values and universal love.

Though most of what we learn about John comes from the followers of Jesus, John was notable enough to be written about by Josephus, the renown Romano-Jewish scholar and historian who wrote during the first century of the Common Era. Josephus says that John was a good man who exhorted his fellow Jews to live righteously, justly and piously, and that he used baptism as a public sign of repentance and renewal. Josephus does not record any eschatological teachings by John. No announcing that the messiah was coming, no making straight the paths of the LORD's anointed one. Did Josephus not know about that preaching that the Gospels describe? Did he suppress that part of the story out of consideration for his Roman and upper-class Jewish audience? Or did John not actually preach those things but they were added into Christian Scripture later because they supported the belief that Jesus was the savior? Fascinating questions that are still being studied, pondered and debated by students of the Bible today.



Did John really baptize Jesus? Most Biblical scholars accept this as probably historically accurate. There are various opinions about why Jesus sought baptism from John. Some think that Jesus started out as a disciple of John before launching his own ministry as a traveling teacher, healer and exorcist. Many people feel that there may have been a bit of rivalry between Jesus and John or between their disciples. There is an account of two of John's disciples leaving John to become disciples of Jesus: "The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, 'Look, the Lamb of God!' When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus." (John 1:35—37). There are some variations in how the different canonical

Gospels say the baptism of Jesus by John happened but all four agree that it did happen. An interesting variation is found in the non-canonical Gospel of the Nazarenes, which says that the idea of being baptized by John originated with the mother and brothers of Jesus, with Jesus not being in favor of it at first but eventually agreeing.

One thing is certain: Herod saw John as a big threat. The Gospels say that Herod's wife had a grudge against John and wanted to have him killed for denouncing her marriage, but that Herod resisted because he perceived John to be righteous and holy. (This isn't the only story in the Bible in which a woman gets blamed for a man's action.) Josephus connects John's execution to Herod's marital issues but he names a different woman as Herod's wife. In the Gospel of Mark the same language is used

for the engineering of John's death sentence as is used for Judas's betrayal of Jesus. Herod's reluctance to execute John because of his righteousness anticipates the story of Pontius Pilate being hesitant to execute Jesus for the same reason. But in these stories, Herod and Pilate are manipulated by others into making the fateful decisions. Whether or not the story about Herod's wife is historically accurate, being a popular, influential prophet in rebellion-prone first century Palestine would probably suffice to put you on the local ruler's radar as a serious threat to his power. It's not all that surprising that John was on a collision course with the executioner.

The story of Herod's stepdaughter dancing for the court and being awarded the prize of the head of John the Baptist mirrors the story of Elijah and King Ahab and Queen Jezebel from the book of First Kings, something that Mark's original readers would have picked up on. The Greek word used for the daughter really does mean a little girl, not a sexy, well-developed teenager as has been depicted by Hollywood. In Herod's day and culture, royal princesses of any age did not dance for ogling grown men. The purpose of this aspect of the story was to show Herod as irredeemably debauched, the kind of guy would do anything, including killing a holy man as a favor to his wife. That draws quite a contrast to John, the strict and proper moralist. Well, one thing you have to say about John: he inspired loyalty. When Herod executed him, his followers promptly showed up to claim his body for the most proper burial they could manage, considering the head was missing, whereas the disciples of Jesus scattered in terror leaving only his women followers and Joseph of Arimathea to pay respects.



But did John believe that Jesus was the messiah? First we need to look at the first century Jewish definition of the term "messiah" (in Hebrew: *mashiach*). It literally means "the anointed one," referring to the ancient practice of anointing kings with oil when they took the throne and assumed power. The messiah was supposed to be a political/military leader who would get rid of the Romans and act as anointed king over Israel in the End of Days – however, to Jews "messiah" does not mean "savior" in the same way it does to Christians. The belief in an innocent, divine or semi-divine messiah who will sacrifice himself to save us from the consequences of our own sins is a purely Christian concept and a Christian way of interpreting certain Old Testament writings. That type of messiah has no basis in Jewish thought either now or back during the time of Jesus. I've heard Christians marvel that the Jews have never been able to recognize Jesus as the messiah but he really did not fulfill the *Jewish* definition of a messiah. Jews have never looked for a messiah to come as Christians later redefined that title. If John made a career out of exhorting Jews to return to being faithful, commandment-obeying, Torah-loving Jews, would he have recognized Jesus as doing the work of a Jewish messiah? As a true prophet, could

John have made the connection to seeing something new and revolutionary, a leap into God's continuing plan for humanity?

So if Jesus is presumed to be sinless, we have to ask why he sought baptism from John. Matthew says that Jesus humbled himself, setting the proper example for everyone else. There is really a lot that we just don't know but it seems probable that Jesus benefited from spending time with John and his disciples and John may have been a sort of mentor to him for a while. It is unlikely that Jesus followed John for a long time or totally submitted himself as John's disciple because from very early in his ministry Jesus had a profound confidence in his own mission, his own beliefs across a range of religious issues, and his own crucial importance in God's plan.



In Christian art, John the Baptist is usually easy to spot. He will be the one wearing furry clothes and looking skinny and disheveled. He has often been portrayed with wings that symbolize his role as a messenger (just as angels, the messengers of God, are painted with wings). Sometimes he is shown with a scroll because messengers have carried written messages or holding a staff or a lamb. Sometimes only his head on a platter is shown, and there are some unsettling depictions of him carrying his own severed head on a platter while having still having his head intact on his torso as well. It's all about symbolism.

For me, Epiphany always starts off wonderfully. The baptism of Jesus is considered to be the point at which he begins spreading his vision of the kingdom of God. Something mysterious and marvelous definitely happened in that experience. Jesus spent time in the wilderness in deep contemplation right after his baptism by John, and things were never the same again. He was on the path to his destiny. It is fitting that we associate Epiphany with searching for the light of new understanding, and stepping out in faith into uncharted territory. Jesus certainly set the example for all of us to explore, to discover, to embrace our own Epiphanies. God's revelation is too wonderful to end, too marvelous to be confined to the past. There is still a lot more in our Christian mission waiting for us – both individually and collectively – to learn about and to experience. We are all on the road and the best is yet to be.

Almighty God, by whose providence your servant John the Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to preach repentance and renewal: Make us desire to follow his teaching and holy life, that we may truly repent, live humbly and constantly speak honestly; make us eager to hold fast to virtue, and patiently endure for the truth's sake; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.