

“With Our Eyes on Bethlehem”

Who is John and why do we hear so much about him in the Gospels and read so much about him during Advent? We have a lot of questions about John. Each Gospel tells us about him, but the accounts vary. Let's look at John in each Gospel starting with the oldest Gospel and proceeding chronologically.

Most scholars agree that the Gospel of **Mark** is the first of the canonical gospels. As we saw last week, John shows up immediately in Mark. A passage from Isaiah, a portion of which is quoted in all the gospels, is used to introduce him. John is the “voice crying out in the wilderness, make straight the pathways of our Lord.” So we are to see John as one who is preparing the hearts and minds of the people of Judea for the coming of one who “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.” John also says that while he baptizes with water the one who is to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit. John is referred to in Mark as the Baptizer but not the Baptist.

Soon after this Jesus comes to John and John baptizes him. In this gospel John does demure from baptizing Jesus. Later John will be arrested. Later still we will hear the story of John's beheading by Herod Antipas.

In **Matthew**, John does not appear until chapter 3 after the birth narrative, the arrival of the Wise Men, the flight into Egypt, and the return. Then we go from child Jesus to John who is called the Baptist by Matthew. We get more of John's preaching in Matthew than in Mark including his fire and brimstone rhetoric. Matthew's John tells us that the one who is coming with baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, and he will burn the chaff.

When John is approached by Jesus John at first refuses to baptize Jesus, but he relents as Jesus requests. Later after he is arrested John will send some of his followers to ask of Jesus if he is the one that they have been waiting for. Jesus answers by recounting his miracles. He also condemns the crowd for not realizing the ministry of John when he was free. Later John will die as in Mark at the hands of Herod.

In **Luke**, John miraculous conception precedes that of Jesus. He is to be born to an older couple who have no children. This is a familiar motif in the Hebrew Scriptures (think of Sarah and Hannah). After Mary conceives by the Holy Spirit she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth and when she enters her home John leaps in her womb proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah before either of them are born.

Later we hear that John receives the word of God (a Hebrew Bible motif for prophets). He begins to preach and while he has some fire in his words he also tells the people how they can live proper lives by caring for their neighbor and not abusing the power they have. We also learn that John baptizes Jesus along with the crowds, but there is no record of them conversing in Luke. We also learn that John is arrested by Herod.

As in Matthew we hear in Luke of John sending his disciples to ask if Jesus is the one or if they are to wait for another. Later we hear that Herod is perplexed by Jesus and thinks he might be John returned from the dead. It is only then that he mentions that he had John beheaded. John is usually referred to only by his first name in Luke. There is only one mention of him as John the Baptist.

Now we come to the reading we heard today from the Gospel of **John**. First of all the gospel writer and John the Baptist are not the same person. In fact, the author of the book of

Revelation is yet another John. John, or in Hebrew Yohanan¹ was a popular name in Israel in the first century just as it is today.

In this gospel there is the out of place mention of John in the prologue/poem about Jesus as the preexistent Word. The Gospel reads, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”² There is no mention of John baptizing Jesus.

John’s role in this gospel is to point the way to Jesus. He not only tells others to expect Jesus, but points him out as “The Lamb of God” when Jesus passes. While in Matthew and Luke John sends his disciples to ask questions of Jesus, John sends his disciples to follow Jesus in John. As the prologue states, John’s role in this gospel is to testify to the light—Jesus, the one coming into the world.

Clearly John’s role in the Gospels was to be a forerunner to Jesus. He was to take the roll of an Old Testament prophet. He was to warn people that their sins were alienating them from each other and most importantly from God. He was to inaugurate Jesus’s ministry by baptizing him in the Jordan. He was to point others toward Jesus and then to bow out of the way and allow Jesus’ ministry to flourish.

With this knowledge what are we to learn from John, and especially in this time of Advent? In the 21st century there are few voices that cry out in the wilderness and draw the whole countryside to them. Oftentimes when we think we have a new prophet we find out he or she has feet of clay. Or they get coopted by the powers and temptations of the world.

While it is not wrong to desire or hope for one such as John, the lessons we can learn go beyond looking for another one like him. Rather we can learn to be like John. In the frenzy of the world and culture that surrounds us the culture that says the more toys we have the better a person we are. We can also not fall for the rant of the powers in the world that say “Look at me. I am the best. I am the most important. I am to be looked up to. I am to be celebrated.”

Instead of being misled by the idols of consumerism and greed or the cult of celebrity and demagoguery we can set our eyes on Bethlehem. We can look toward the little backwater town, on the outskirts of the great empire of Rome. We can peer through the darkness to a little stable where a poor family will come to rest after a long journey. We can wait in hope and love knowing what will give us the greatest joy is about to be born—Emmanuel, God with us.

The story of John’s life is most importantly about his waiting. We are to wait not in anxiety but with hearts and minds that have repented from the parts of the world that attempt to draw us away from God. And once we have repented to share the joy of a quiet heart and a centered mind. That is what we can learn from John for this season and for all seasons.

¹ In Hebrew this name means “Yahweh is gracious”

² John 1:6-9 NRSV