

DECEMBER 16TH, 2018: THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Zephaniah 3:14-18a Philippians 4:4-7 Luke 3:10-18

There's a reason why John the Baptizer's demands in today's gospel pericope are similar to the gospel Jesus' demands. Though some Christians don't like to admit it, the carpenter who lived and worked in Capernaum was originally one of John's disciples. It seems this wilderness prophet first turned Jesus on to the faith he later publicly proclaimed.

It's quite probable Jesus originally seemed content just to be one of John's disciples. Only after the Baptizer's arrest – or martyrdom – did Jesus step forward and pick up the prophet's mantle. No wonder he was so concerned with how we relate to others. He had a good teacher and mentor.

“Whoever has two cloaks,” John insists, “should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.” True faith revolves not around worship and rubrics, but around how we give ourselves to others, especially those over whom we exercise power.

The historical John and Jesus were so similar in their messages that Jesus' earliest disciples thought it necessary to frequently point out his superiority to the Baptizer, even employing the Baptizer himself to convey their message. “One mightier than I is coming,” the gospel John proclaims, “I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals.” No matter how great John is, Jesus is always at least one degree better. “I am baptizing with water . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

As I mentioned above, some Christians are uncomfortable with this explanation. In their mind, the historical Jesus was independent from any outside influence. As God, Jesus accomplished everything on his own. Yet the author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminded his community that Jesus was more than just God; he was also human. With that in mind, the Council of Chalcedon actually stated in 451 CE: “Jesus of Nazareth was a human being like all of us in everything except sin.” That means, if I can be influenced by others, so can Jesus. As unfamiliar as it might sound, we're grateful John the Baptizer came into his life. John's personality seems to have made a significant difference in Jesus' personality.

I've often confessed that what originally attracted me to Scripture wasn't Scripture but the people who taught me Scripture. I was impressed by the mentality they brought to religion and the attitude toward faith revealed through their teachings. Though I never thought, as a diocesan priest, I'd have an opportunity to study and teach Scripture, down deep I wanted to spend my ministry doing so. More than anything, I wanted my personality to be shaped by the same experiences that shaped the personalities of the people I admired. Thankfully, I was eventually given that opportunity.

There's nothing more rewarding than proclaiming and agreeing with the joy Zephaniah found in experiencing Yahweh, or the happiness Paul discovered in following the risen Jesus. Yet if it hadn't been for the Scripture scholars who came into my life years ago, I probably would never have gone that deep into my faith.

Considering Jesus spent at least three hours on the cross, I sometimes wonder what went through his mind during that time. Could he have spent some of those three hours thanking God for the people who came into his life? If he did, I'm certain John the Baptizer would have been near the top of his list. Though we Catholics often wax eloquent on the influence Jesus' mother had on him, I presume she wasn't alone. Jesus might not have been dying that Friday afternoon had it not been for the example the Baptizer provided for him. Things could have been quite different for him, as they'd also be for some of those we've influenced.

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DECEMBER 23RD, 2018: FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Micah 5:1-4a Hebrews 10:5-10 Luke 1:39-45

One reason our sacred authors compose their writings springs from a desire to make certain their communities always “look” in the right direction. They’re convinced it’s possible to ignore God’s message simply because we don’t notice it, even when it’s right in front of us. Our biblical writers are determined this isn’t going to happen “on their watch.” They remind their readers that we follow a God constantly working through unexpected people, in unexpected, subtle ways. In God’s eyes, one’s “worldly” importance doesn’t count; one’s social acceptability is worthless. God demands we experience the whole world, not just the part and the people with which we’re comfortable.

I’m old enough to actually remember playing the “Pong” video game when it first came out in the 1970s--an excellent way to develop my reflexes. I never knew from where the ball was coming. I simply had to be constantly ready. Yet, as a student of Scripture, I was aware a “biblical pong” game existed long before the 20th century. From the beginning of faith, God’s followers were forced to acknowledge they had no idea from where God’s word and presence were coming. They could appear anywhere. The faithful could only work on developing their faith reflexes by listening to Scripture texts like today’s three readings.

More than 700 years before Jesus’ birth, Micah prophetically warns the people of Judah to be careful about the direction from which they’re expecting the Messiah to come. They might miss him; he could be coming from a clan and tribe they’re not anticipating. In this case, from of all places, Bethlehem-Ephrathah. Of course, everyone listening to Micah was familiar with King David and the I Samuel story in which this greatest of all Jewish kings not only came from the same town, but whose own father had no idea Yahweh had chosen the “runt” of the family for such a prestigious position. Just like no one saw “that one coming,” so no one can predict from where the Messiah’s coming. If the nation’s royal salvation once came from such an unexpected place, it could just as unpredictably come from there again.

Mary of Nazareth’s relative Elizabeth had a similar experience 1,000 years after David’s coronation. How could she have anticipated someone she’d known all her life would eventually become “the mother of (her) Lord?” Though, as a good Jew, she’d been expecting the Messiah’s arrival, she certainly hadn’t been looking in Mary’s direction. Elizabeth’s Yahweh-inspired surprises didn’t stop with the conception of her and Zechariah’s son. The “best” was yet to come.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews hints at why unexpectedness is built into our faith. Instead of revolving our lives around “sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings,” followers of Jesus are simply committed to doing God’s will. The risen Jesus has freed us from the law mandating all those rituals, and replacing it with an obligation just to imitate him/her. As we know from Scripture – beginning with the Yahwistic author of Genesis 38 – we follow a God who’s notorious for taking us down roads we could never have predicted. Nothing or no one is off limits. Just when we’ve outlined the perimeters with which we’re comfortable, we discover God has created not just new rules, but a whole new game.

No wonder the gospel Jesus frequently warns his followers, “Stay awake!” Just as marriages begin to die the moment the partners start to predict one another’s actions, so our faith starts to die the moment we start to predict God’s actions in our lives.

Perhaps we should encourage our parish banner makers to create a big one with an image of the Pong game . . . unless it makes us too nervous.