

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC  
III Advent  
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J Mary Luti

## Not Me

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

If the only gospel to come down to us were the fourth gospel, the one according to John, we would not know very much about John the Baptist. We wouldn't know, for example, that his last name was 'the Baptist.' We wouldn't know what he ate and how he dressed either.

If all we knew were the fourth gospel, we preachers would not be able to make the Baptist out to be something of a freak every Advent. We would not be able to assure you, in an earnest admonishing sort of way, that if he were to appear to us right now—in his camel hair shirt, eating grasshoppers, demanding conversion—we would tell him to go to the Cambridge Multi-Service Center, and if he refused, we'd call the police.

If we had only the gospel according to John, all the wiggly wee ones at my old home church would have no reason to belt out that great Sunday School song about John the Baptist entitled, "Bugs for Lunch," which they vastly prefer to "On Jordan's Bank, the Baptist's Cry" (and which they will surely continue to prefer, even when they grow up—with a refrain that goes, "Yuck! Yuck! Yuck!," how can you go wrong?)

If we had just this one gospel, we wouldn't know that John the Baptists was thrown in jail by the tetrarch, Herod Antipas, after publicly condemning him for marrying a woman who was already married (to Herod's own brother)—a woman who was also Herod's niece, which added insult to injury by adding incest to adultery.

We would also not know that Herod eventually had John's head on a platter in order to please his wife, who, by the way, manipulated her own daughter's sex appeal as a belly dancer to get Herod to agree to John's execution.

(Do I have your attention yet?)

If you want to know how John was conceived (miraculously, yes; immaculately, no); if you want to know who his famous second cousin was, why he was *not* named after any of his relatives, how his Daddy got his voice back (and how he lost it in the first place), or where he lived until he began preaching and baptizing, you'll have to read the gospel according to Matthew, Mark and, especially, Luke. The gospel according to John could not care less about this sort of thing.

Here is all the fourth gospel tells us about John the Baptist:

He was not the Messiah. He was not Elijah. He was not 'the prophet.' He was not the Light. He was not worthy. He was sent by God. He was a voice in the wilderness. He testified to One among us whom we do not know, the Light of the World.

That's pretty much it. A voice. A witness. But not the Messiah. Not Elijah. Not 'the prophet.' Not the Light. Not worthy of the One who is coming.

And every time anyone in the fourth gospel tries to make the Baptist say more, claim more, want more, do more, be more, he digs in and resists. "What part of 'not me' do you not understand?", he seems to ask.

In another chapter, he goes so far as to say, "He (meaning Jesus) must increase, I must decrease"—which, medieval authors were fond of pointing out, he did do, when his head was chopped off.

"It's not about me," says John the Baptist, "Not me, *him*."

Now, if you have ever taken credit for an idea that wasn't yours, padded your resume with a phony degree or a bogus award, or dropped a big name to enhance your status in social situations, you could learn a thing or two about truth-telling from John the Baptist.

If you are unhappy because you are you and not someone else; if you don't know yet that liking yourself is not something you are supposed to do at the expense of or in competition with others, maybe taking a

page from John's "I-am-not-he" book would be good for you.

If you hate it when somebody gets more praise than you; or, as John Lennon said in an old interview, if you resent it that when you were growing up your genius was not as screamingly obvious to others as it was to you, and you are still furious that your mother threw out your early poetry, still bewildered that it took such a ridiculously long time for you to be discovered, then John (the Baptist, not Lennon) could be a good model for you too, a model of a humble, self-effacing life. "It's not about me—not me, not me, not me," you might want to try saying with him like a mantra. "I must decrease, decrease, decrease."

You could do that, yes. Take self-negating John as your role model. But, honestly, I don't recommend it. To deal with issues like these, I'd rather you employ a good therapist and a seasoned spiritual director. I would not look to John for inspiration or good example.

Because it does not seem to me that the behavior of John the Baptist in our passage today has much that is useful to say to our garden variety neediness and ego issues. I don't think the gospel means to present him as an instance of mature intra-psychic development. I'm not sure that he has much to teach us about the practice of ordinary humility either.

Which is not to say that he would not want us to live more firmly tethered to the truth, which is the classic definition of humility—to know who's who and what's what, and adjust ourselves accordingly. To know, for example, both that we are good and gifted by God, *and* that we are not God's gift to the universe—not the Messiah—and that if we think we are, or that we ought to be, we need to get a grip.

But John's intense focus on 'decreasing' is not about ordinary humility. Likewise his posture of always pointing away from himself—which led medieval artists to give John the finger (a pointing index finger was John's iconographic tag). No, his "not-me-ness" is about something bigger and deeper than that.

In fact, if you try to emulate his not-me-ness too earnestly, you could end up in a heap of trouble. A lot of people of my generation who had a particular sort of religious upbringing, especially women, had this

not-me kind of humility inculcated in us. But it was not really humility at all. It was a perversely pious practice of always refusing to take credit for things we said and did that were really good. “*Non nobis, Domine,*” we prayed with then psalmist, “Not to us, O Lord, but to you alone be the glory.”

Now, that’s not a bad prayer. In theory, it’s the best prayer you can pray. But for too many of us, the God whom we were supposed to glorify was like a cosmic Edgar Bergen, and we were all his Charlie McCarthies, ventriloquists’ dummies on the lap of the Lord. If we were brilliant or successful or especially kind or virtuous, it didn’t have anything to do with us, we learned to insist. It was entirely the work of the Holy Spirit.

Many of us ended up believing that the most faithful way to live was to live *invisibly*. God was happiest with us when we denied our natures, our gifts, our accomplishments. We were wary of even the smallest affirmation, and so we mastered the art of deflection and self-deprecating humor. To this day a lot of us can’t bear a sincere and well-deserved compliment. Some still mistrust their own beauty and strength, afraid that the praise others give them steals praise from God.

Let’s pause briefly here so that those of you who were *not* brought up this way and have never interiorized these debilitating constraints may silently thank God that you don’t have to deal with any of this rubbish...

Amen.

No, John the Baptist may not be your man if all you need is to unravel a few ego and affectivity problems, get rid of your excessive neediness, learn to like yourself, and so on.

But he is your man if you have ever sensed that life is meant to be lived from a grounded center, in relation to something or someone that matters *ultimately*. And that because that ultimate someone or something is the anchor of your heart, you can live fearlessly and fruitfully into the mystery of this world—and into the mystery of you.

He is your man if you have ever sensed that the more you grow towards this centered wisdom, the less you need to assert yourself, to impose yourself, to exhaust yourself with anxiety about what will become of you.

John is your man if you have grasped the fact that life was meant to be lived beyond the boundary of the loved and accepted self, lived in the world and for the sake of others in such a way that, once you are safely out of your own way, you become finally *available*.

He is your man if you have ever wondered, “What would a life be like that is all preparation for Another?”

John is your man if you increasingly desire to welcome and to join yourself to that Other—the Christ he points to, who, as scripture says, fills up the whole universe and yet makes room in it for everything and everyone hitherto excluded.

He is your man if you want to welcome all whom Christ welcomes, which is another way of talking about justice, and another way of talking about praise.

He is your man if this desire for justice and for praise is becoming so great within you that it is as if you yourself are becoming small, decreasing as it increases. It is as if you are becoming indistinguishable from its grandeur, as if you are melting into its joy.

If John is at all a fearsome, odd, and challenging character in our Advent texts, it is perhaps only because he has figured out a little more than most of us who he is not, and who he is, and what his heart ultimately desires.

He is not, of course, without doubts or questions. Even after making all those ringing declarations about Jesus being the Messiah for sure, he later sends emissaries to Jesus to inquire further into his identity. John is just a human being—“There was,” our passage today began, “a man sent from God,” an ordinary person like you and me.

But John is an ordinary human being who is able to do the one thing that many of us who like our Christianity busy and talkative do not

have the confidence in God and the courage of our convictions to do—  
to fall silent, to stop imposing, to step back, to get out of the way,  
simply to point. Simply to let the Light enlighten, the Love love, and the  
Lord come in.

John the Baptist is your man if you hope with all your heart for such a  
Light, such a Love, and such a Lord.

He is for you if you want to make room.