

January 14, 2018 "After Me...." Mark 1:1-8

I have a tendency to say we Protestants in general, and Presbyterians among them tend to pay a lot less attention to Mary than we really should. She is key not only to the history of God's redeeming love in Jesus, she is the prime source for the Gospel writers as disciples of Jesus for what we know about Jesus birth, childhood, and the beginnings of Jesus ministry. It also needs to be noted that she was a constant companion in Jesus ministry. As a witness she is an extraordinarily important and sensitive observer.

But we also have a tendency to rush by another personality that is important to the story of God's redeeming love in Christ. I am referring to Jesus cousin, whom we call John the Baptist. Part of John the Baptist's importance, not to be confused with John the disciple, is that he provides a continuing of the awe factor so present in the Christmas story. There has been a lot of water under the bridge since Bethlehem.

As we take up the story in Mark chapter 1, Jesus and John are young men close to 30 years of age. John is 6 months older according to the Gospel account in Luke. Jesus has gotten to be bigger and stronger as a result of his work life in construction which I mentioned last week as tending to be more in the lifting, lugging and fitting of stone than working in wood. We learned in Israel that John went at some point to Qumran, and spent time in the Essene monastery there cultivating his spiritual life, rejecting to some extent the legalistic ways of the Scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the Law. He pursued under quiet monastic discipline a life of being close to the Lord His God, ignoring personal comfort, including basic but sparse food.

Then he does something unexpected. He leaves the community at Qumran and takes up this ministry of that fulfills yet another Old Testament prophecy, the role of preparing the way for the Messiah. As it is written in Isaiah 40, "God the Lord Almighty sends his messenger...the voice of one crying in the wilderness...out in the wilds of the desert and the rock, along the shores of the Jordan. He does two things. He preaches a very evangelical message concerning God's judgement of sin, and the fact that no one is clean. He calls his hearers to repentance. "Cowboys change your ways, or with us you will ride, trying to catch the devil's herd across these endless skies." Words from a country song belonging to my youth. And he says that this changing of ways should be marked by a ritual washing...baptism...actually more than a ritual washing, a dying and resurrection experience, plunged beneath the water's surface, and lifted up the light of day. Die and be reborn. His message resonates with the people. Even some of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law reach out to this man in the midst of their spiritual hunger for God.

But there is another fact of experience we have to remember if we are really going to appreciate John the Baptist's ministry, witness, and role in all of this. It goes to the heart of the claim that God is involved in every detail of what is unfolding, and it is about our salvation from sin in Jesus. So I am flipping to Luke chapter 1:39 and following. Mary has been told she is going to be the mother of Jesus by an angel. She has expressed her incredulity because she has

not been with a man, and she has I am sure with a measure of fear, submitted to what she perceives as the clear and unquestionable will of the Almighty God. She does not immediately run to Joseph. She goes to a relative of hers. She goes to the home of Zechariah the priest, and specifically to talk to Elizabeth his wife. She knocks on the door and is admitted and greets the older woman. And two things happen at the same time. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps, moves, kicks, and Elizabeth is touched by the Holy Spirit...this is a God in my life moment. Without being told what has happened, Elizabeth says, "Blessed among women are you Mary, and blessed is the child you will bear." She explains that the "mother of her Lord" has come to visit and the second she was greeted by Mary, Elizabeth's baby leaped for joy, in recognition of Jesus. We would be fools if we did not think John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth shared that story with their son. At least 2 households are living in the light that their babies are going to become very special men and that God is in charge of what is unfolding. And it is this older woman Elizabeth who says of Mary, "Blessed is she who has believed what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished." Both mothers are convinced, God's will is going to be revealed, and wonders of God are going to happen.

It is 30 years after the Christmas story with all its marvels, angel stories, God's good news being announced, shepherds hearing that God loves them, Wise Men from the east coming to worship a new born king. And the continuum of God's wonders continue to unfold. John is ministering in the hillside wilderness of Judea. The population of the countryside is affected. Crowds of people come out from the city of Jerusalem, not just to watch, but to be convicted by the message of John the Baptist and to submit (hardly the right word) begging to be baptized in the waters and to receive new life through faith in the love of a redeeming saving God who is the heart and soul of Hebrew faith.

John is not fancy or stylish. He is blunt with his audience. They confess their sins. They are baptized. And they receive a special word of hope. This the most important part of the John the Baptist message. "After me, will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water....but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, literally the Spirit of the living God, the power that moved over the waters at the time of creation, the power that parted the waters in the experience of the Exodus, the power that inspired Isaiah and Jeremiah the prophets who foretold the coming of the Christ in such (what other word suffices) wonder inspiring detail.

Mark's testimony is shaped out of the experience of being close to those who would be called to discipleship by Jesus, Peter especially, James and John and once again the Mary link through all 3 of these close friends so affected by the ministry, the death and the resurrection of Christ. But the important detail in all of this is simply to notice on the way by the consistency of the testimony. It is not off the wall wild ravings. It is the telling of the convicting stories of individuals and households have experienced God's claim on their lives and the lives of their children. Elizabeth did not want John the Baptist to die. Mary did not want to lose Jesus. They are propelled along the path of faith holding on for dear life as details and revelations fill them

wonder and fear, moments of faith, and fear and discomfort, and moments of conviction and faith intermingled. They see what they see, hear what they hear, and their heart break turns to extraordinary joy as they discover that even when they thought they understood, they did not fully understand. Submission is such a crucial part of faith in God. Not that we close our eyes and are blind in faith, rather that we are impelled by our convictions to take the next step in faith even in our discomfort about what it could mean for us personally. Remember the book title? If you want to walk on water you have to get out of the boat!

That's what these people are doing in Mark and Luke and Matthew and John and Acts. They have seen just enough, heard just enough, done just enough that they know they need to take the next step...even when their human security senses cry out...I don't want to. And we must never forget...filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God. The Spirit of Jesus. His power making it possible for us to do....whatever we are called to do.

Praise God for the ministry and the message, the insight and the willingness to serve, of John the Baptist...Jesus' cousin.

Let us pray;

Lord we give thanks for the signs and wonders we see consistently in the Gospel records, and the lives of the people you engaged in holy work in the real world with real people and their problems. That reality is the source of our hope as we ask, be in us and with us that we too might be people empowered to serve others and YOUR Holy kingdom in ways we can barely understand. Lead us. Guide us. Move us. Use us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen