

John the Baptist: Setting the Stage

Luke 1:57-80, 3:1-9

December 10, 2006

If you've been to a dinner show or a rock concert, it is likely that you were treated to an opening act to warm up the crowd before the star performer appeared on stage. Lesser-known artists are often used to galvanize the crowd until it is screaming for the star with top billing. Circus clowns warm up the audience and raise anticipation about the main event in the center ring. A cadre of staff experts work long and hard behind the scenes so that a summit meeting between heads of state will not only look good to the media, but will issue in substantive results. Oftentimes in life we need someone who prepares the way for us, someone who goes before us, carries a message, sets the stage, opens the door, engages the preliminaries and creates context for response and fulfillment.

John the Baptist is such a forerunner. He is the one who sets the stage for Jesus' coming, the one who urges people to prepare for the coming of the Lord. I admire John for the role he plays. Not many of us can take a "back seat" so easily. John does not call attention to himself. He must be very secure in God's call upon his life as a messenger, but not as **the message**. John knows that he does not have the leading role in this drama. He accepts a supporting role and carries it with grace and passion.

This morning I want to highlight two aspects of John's opening act. In preparation for Jesus' coming, John calls us to repent, to change our ways, to turn around. John is not advocating for minor changes, he is calling for radical movement, 180 degree change of direction. John calls for a closure of one act and the beginning of a new act, complete with a change of scenery. Life is meant to be lived differently. A new moral order is being inaugurated. John calls attention to a new way of living that corresponds to God's will.

In calling us to change, John is not judging our worth; he is inviting us into wholeness. He is not criticizing our past, but offering us an enriched future. Those of us who already claim the name of Christ can become too comfortable, feeling that we know it all, we attend church, we're doing the right thing. But I've discovered that the more I grow, the more there is to learn. Life continues to present opportunities to change my ways into Christ-like ways. It may be in our attitudes toward people who are different from us or people who have hurt us. We may be called to change habits which are destructive to ourselves or others. Even the language we use may

need an occasional cleansing. Once we face the truth of who we are, we can claim the hope of who God wants us to become.

A medieval legend tells about a man who was decadent and irresponsible in many ways, but who had enough grace in him to want to be good. He went to a costume maker who gave him a costume to wear—complete with a halo wired to his head. As the man walked down the street he was tempted to act and react in his normal, shiftless way—but then he remembered the halo on his head. So he decided to act differently. He gave money to a beggar on the street. He treated his wife well. He refused to cut corners at work.

Eventually he returned the halo costume—but as he was leaving the costume shop he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and he saw a permanent halo glowing above his head! It seems that he had become what he did—his changed ways made possible a deeper transformation in his life. By turning around and beginning to behave in a new way, this man found a permanent new direction for his life.¹

Like sunflowers naturally turn toward the sun, we are called to turn toward the Light of Christ, to reflect his image, radiate his character. In addition to changing ourselves, God's new order mandates changes in our human systems so that they will respond to human need with the same compassion revealed in Christ Jesus.

When we turn toward Christ, we bear witness to the One who is greater than us. The transformation God works in us enables us to be a witness to the work of God in the world. When our heart is turned away from God, we can bring dishonor to God's name. But when our lives are turned toward Christ, like those sunflowers, we bear faithful witness to his presence in our lives.

The witness we bear can draw others to Christ. Like John, we can set the stage for Jesus to come to someone's life. It has been said that "our changed lives might be the only gospel some people will ever read."² Through our living, we can proclaim the good news of God's love and so draw the attention of others to God.

Bonnee Hoy, a gifted composer, died in the prime of life. At her memorial service, a friend told of how a mockingbird used to sing regularly outside Bonnee's window on summer nights.

Bonnee would stand at her bedroom window, peering into darkness, listening intently, marveling at the beautiful songs the mockingbird sang. Then, musician that she was, Bonnee decided to sing back. So she whistled the first four notes of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. With amazing quickness

the mockingbird learned these four notes and sang them back to Bonnee.
“And in perfect pitch,” Bonnee marveled.

Then for a time the bird disappeared. But one night toward the very end of her life, when Bonnee was so terribly sick, the bird returned and, in the midst of other songs, several times sang those first four notes of Beethoven’s *Fifth*.

At the memorial service, her beloved friend, with a smile on her lips and tears in her eyes said, “I like to think of that now. Somewhere out there (in a big, big world) is a mockingbird who sings Beethoven because of Bonnee.”³

Are we living lives so full of song and joy and that they bring out the music of other people’s lives?

Are we living a faith so deep and strong that it brings out the faith of others?

Is there someone out there who praises God because of our witness?

If not, perhaps we need to change our tune or clean up our act. For like John, we are called to set the stage for the good news of God’s love and grace to be heard. We are called to bear witness to the amazing presence of Jesus Christ in our lives.

¹ Thomas Troeger, quoted by Susan R. Andrews, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Volume XII, Number 1, p. 13.

² Elaine Roulet.

³ Terence Elwyn Johnson, Margate Community Church, New Jersey. Quoted in *Homiletics*.

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