

ADVENT II

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’ Luke 3:3

Most of you know how I love John the Baptizer. I *love* him. Next to Jesus and a couple of women, he’s my favorite Gospel character. For years, to me, Jesus was a rather remote and daunting character, while John seemed easier to connect with, familiar in his own weird, cranky way—almost an alter ego.

In the synoptic Gospels, John appears mostly in his adult guise, trekking the desert, wearing camel’s hair and eating locusts and wild honey, calling the crowds who followed him a brood of vipers, and warning of the wrath to come, the winnowing hook, and so forth. He’s a formidable figure, alien and scary maybe.

And eventually he gets in terminal trouble by publicly denouncing Herod’s marital antics, and is imprisoned and then beheaded. His could be a cautionary tale for rabble-rousers. But he stands, and walks, in the tradition of the great Hebrew prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Amos. And for me he’s inspirational. But he’s certainly not cozy, in the Gospel version.

But in many paintings of the Holy Family, appearing with Mary and the Infant Jesus, the third figure is not Joseph but the young John. He is pictured sometimes as a few months older than his cousin – 6 months or so, as Matthew and Luke would have it – sometimes as a child of 5 or 6. Frequently he leans against Mary’s knee, looking up eagerly, yearningly, at mother and son. Often he holds out a small cross, foreshadowing Jesus’ destiny, or some other token. In these depictions John is simply a child, innocent and pristine, no hint of what *his* gory fate will be.

When I was in India five years ago, various Indians we encountered would refer to their relations as brother-cousins or sister-cousins. I believe other cultures employ such usages as well. I took it to mean that these relationships were especially close – that this cousin was as close as a brother, but I sometimes wondered if it were simply a term of endearment that implied no blood relationship at all.

And I’m not confident that John and Jesus were in fact cousins, as we would understand the term. What I do know is that in Biblical times, in Palestine, genealogies were critical, and they were also, often, fictitious, as we would understand them. We joke about all the *begats* in the Bible: why are they there? they are so boring! And they don’t

always delineate blood relationships – indeed, they often don’t involve “real” historical people, but rather, archetypal figures significant in salvation history. Genealogies served to establish legitimacy– royal legitimacy or religious legitimacy.

And it was necessary for the Gospel tellers, and writers, to place Jesus of Nazareth in the line of the great prophets. And by extension, to place the Baptizer there; he serves as the link, the great transitional figure between the message of justice and judgement proclaimed by the prophets of Hebrew Scripture and the Good News of justice and love offered by Jesus.

I don’t like to make the distinction too clear; I think that’s a mistake. There’s plenty of love to be found in Hebrew Scripture, and plenty of judgement in Jesus’ teaching. But there’s a shift, the balance tends toward hope and fulfillment. Jesus brings with him new signs that the realm of God is at hand. And John ushers in the age of Jesus. John is Jesus’ spiritual brother-cousin.

When I was young, I had little experience of brother-cousins, or sister-cousins, not in the sense of role models, older relatives I looked up to. One slightly older girl cousin – a second cousin– lived nearby and I used to get her hand-me-down smocked frocks, but that was about the extent of what she had to offer me as a child, or ever. She was actually a kind of reverse role model – not a bad person, not at all, but bland and wishy-washy.

I am the of eldest five children, so I didn’t have older siblings to look up to and (maybe) admire and emulate. I did have the experience of having the next in line, my brother, be privileged along the way because he was a boy. He was sent away to boarding school a couple of years after my parents claimed that they “couldn’t afford” to send me. He was offered the chance to take over my father’s business and I was not, though I worked there for several summers and my brother never did. (He *never* did; he wisely went his own way to become very successful in his own business.)

Now, I’m more than grateful for the way things have turned out. I decided to go to public high school, one of the best choices I ever made, and I doubt if anyone can, or ever could, imagine me running a technical business! And my parents were of their generation, where male privilege was a given. But still, sometimes it was hard to swallow.

However, what this constellation of circumstances meant was that I’ve always had to find my exemplars and mentors where I could. I don’t know at what age, really, most of us start consciously thinking about our role models. I remember most from my own

growing up, not so much exemplars, exactly, but confidantes, people who listened to me and helped me to figure out what kind of person I was and how to accomplish my goals. A fairly self-absorbed approach, and fairly typical of adolescence.

As I reflect back, I suspect it was not till my early thirties, when I began to wonder about ordination, that I began really to pay attention to figures I admired, leaders in the Church and world, and to try to discern what I could learn from them.

These were not always people much like me. I've spoken often of my priest, friend and mentor Dick Martin. Our personalities could hardly have been more different: he was generally cautious, strategic, and in our conservative parish had to hew to the middle of the road most of the time. I learned a great deal from him about what *not* to do if I expected to get anywhere in the Church, and I learned as well, I think, how to manage my gifts –different from his– in positive and constructive ways.

One of my dear friends from seminary observed, watching Dick and me together, “I believe you are completing a part of his priesthood for him: the radical part.” It was an intuitive statement, mystical, almost, and it felt, and still feels, true. Together, we were somehow more complete.

Dick died far too young. And I carry him with me every day. I believe I am still completing his priesthood, his ministry. He was, and is, my brother-cousin.

In a couple of weeks I will preside at the memorial service for Richard Gamble, husband of my friend Nicki. Nicki and I have been pro-choice colleagues and friends for many years, and participated together in the abortion dialogue process I've often talked about, involving three pro-choice and three pro-life leaders – a process that forged a strange and miraculous intimacy among the six of us.

When we met to plan the service, we talked about Dick's years of living in Africa, beginning businesses in Nigeria, working for women's reproductive health and justice, which was his lifelong, and international, mission. We talked about the African concept of *Ubuntu*, an ethic focusing on people's allegiances and relations with each other. Archbishop Desmond Tutu defines *Ubuntu* this way: *A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.*

Ubuntu clearly extends beyond the realm of personal individual relationships to encompass concerns of compassion and justice. As did, of course, the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptizer. Did it ever include anything like the tender intimate scenes portrayed by Renaissance artists? Probably not. But those pictures do suggest a strong and fateful bond, a bond that's *true*, in the Biblical, first century meaning of truth.

Even if they weren't related by blood, *even if, in fact, they never met*, they shared that bond: a passion for justice, an eager, emphatic, profound yearning for the coming of the realm of God. Their ministries and missions strengthened and reinforced each other's. Each loved and appreciated what the other represented. They were brother-cousins of the spirit. They had *Ubuntu*.

During this season of Advent, we await the coming, once again, of the Christ Child, the Messiah, the one who serves as mentor and exemplar to all of us who follow Jesus, our model for the meaning of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu*, in fact, resembles what we mean when we talk about the body of Christ, the interconnectedness of all who have made our baptismal vows to *uphold the dignity of every human being*.

And while we await that coming, let us give thanks for all those who serve as our brother and sister cousins of the flesh or of the spirit, those whose presence fills our lives with courage, hope, and love.

Amen.