

ADVENT III

When John (the Baptizer) heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Matthew 11:2

Here, again, we have the Baptizer, but now time has skipped ahead from last week's Gospel, and John is in prison. He's no longer in the wilderness preaching about judgment and calling for repentance, he's no longer baptizing hoards, including Jesus. He's imprisoned, we will learn later, because he has denounced King Herod for philandering with his sister-in-law.

Herod wants to kill him, as was the custom for rulers in the ancient middle east when dealing with rivals and threats – I've just read a biography of Cleopatra, who did away with all three of her siblings, following her family's tradition and that of other royals. But Herod was not a profile in courage, and he's afraid to kill John because the people take him to be a prophet.

John is troubled, as who wouldn't be, with a death threat hanging over him. But his concern here is what Jesus is up to: healing, and mercy? What kind of Messiah teaches in synagogues, preaches about the inbreaking realm of God, and healing all kinds of diseased and infirmities? This is not what John, and not what his culture, expects a Messiah to be up to.

Somebody said to me last week, *I'm always struck by how different John and Jesus are. John is so harsh, and Jesus is not*, or words to that effect. I said, *really? I see more similarities. They were cousins, supposedly. And they grew up together, they would have known each other.*

Even as I was speaking, I thought, *what an odd thing for me to be saying. I'm acting as if all the legend and iconography about John and Jesus were factual, and could be discussed in family systems theory.*

I don't mean that John and Jesus weren't real. They were. And John probably baptized Jesus, because that account is such an oddity that it's probably true. Why did the Son of God need to be cleansed from sin? That's been a theological embarrassment and conundrum for many centuries.

But beyond that, did the toddler John hang around Mary's knee, gazing adoringly at the infant, hand extended, sometimes trying to hand him a symbolic gift, as he is often depicted in Baroque and Renaissance art? Probably not so much. Did they learn family values together? I doubt it. There's really no gospel basis for thinking John had personal knowledge of Jesus. So why did I respond this way to my interlocutor at Coffee Hour?

This is why, incidentally, I am always so pleased and grateful when people talk to me about my sermons. I'm not just looking for praise, though that's always nice, of course. But when people have substantive comments, I think about them, and they are grist for the theological mill in my mind. And these comments often prompt a further sermon, because they let me know what folks are interested in. So, talk to me!

The novelist E.M. Forester, when writing about theories of fiction, made the distinction between flat characters and round characters. Flat characters are two-dimensional, relatively uncomplicated and do not change throughout the course of a work. By contrast, round characters are complex and undergo development, sometimes surprising us with their evolution.

To take some examples from fairly current T.V. culture: Jack Bauer of 24 is a flat character. He has a couple of qualities and abilities, and while the plots may hold surprises for us, Jack Bauer's personality does not. But President Jed Barrett – and many of the characters in West Wing – are more than caricatures. They're often confused and ambivalent, their motives are not always clear, and we see them mature and change in the course of the series.

The Baptizer is a flat character. He's an eccentric and gloom- and doom-monger. Whatever he may have been like in "real life", in the gospels he's presented with a couple of vivid characteristics and a very limited viewpoint and message.

Jesus is rounder. He's not filled out the way many fictional characters are – again, I'm not saying he's fictional, but the gospels are more propaganda than complete or accurate history, and Jesus is portrayed to suit the various purposes of the gospel writers. We rarely know his moods or his motivations. We aren't conscious of his self-understanding or his feelings. But he is written as multi-talented, contradictory, often mysterious and ambiguous.

Sometimes he preaches love, sometimes judgment. Sometimes he's incredibly generous, sometimes impatient and moody. Sometimes he's bold, sometimes cautious, and, at least once, he's afraid. Sometimes he welcomes crowds, sometimes he retreats to be alone. We are led by some of the gospelists to believe that his understanding of his

identity and mission changes and grows during the course of his ministry. He's many-dimensional, even in the very spare form of the gospels. Compared with John, Jesus is round.

My companion at coffee hour went on to ask me if I thought I might take personal refuge in the idea that the Baptizer, one of my heroes, is notable for his irascibility? In other words, am I looking to justify, if not valorize, my own sharp edges?

I said, *Oh yes, I'm not that un-self-aware.* Certainly John's character, as sketched, helps me to feel that there are a variety of spiritual gifts. My task is not to ignore or deny my tendency to impatience, on the one hand, nor to celebrate in excess on the other. Nor to believe that impatience is my only quality. God does not call me, or any of us, to be flat characters.

So then we talked a bit at coffee hour about how we do develop spiritually: do we play to the strengths we have, or do we concentrate on bringing out our shadow side, what the profession jargon calls the *growing edges*? Most of us do both, I think, in our attempt to become rounder characters. And our focus will vary depending on the times in our lives, what occasions call out of us, and what our goals are.

We are also called, as the Baptizer is called, to recognize that, in life, there are really no flat characters. We are all complex, multi-faced creatures. We all have strengths and weaknesses, we all have mixed and hidden motives, we all have God-given gifts and potential.

What John needs is a new understanding of who the Messiah in reality is, what kinds of work the Messiah does, and what sort of people he does it with. And Jesus acknowledges that such new understanding may be hard to come by. It's not only the Baptizer who doesn't get it. The disciples, his most intimate companions, often don't get it. Even to the end. Even beyond the end.

But they keep trying to understand. And that, my dear friends, is what we are called to do as well. We are called to try to see, and to understand, first ourselves. Then, those around us, the living Christ in our midst. We are called to explore the many dimensions bestowed by God on each and every one of us, and to do our best to honor and respect ourselves and one another in all our marvelous complexity and diversity.

And the great wonder is that God encompasses all of this: all our exploration, all our dim but growing understandings, all our ambiguities, self-contradictions, all our flaws and all our genius. God embraces all of this, and so much more. More than we can ever, in our wildest dreams, begin to imagine. Amen