

A voice that speaks of peace

Dave Feick – July 14, 2024

Did John get it wrong?

Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night, and wondered whether you've been getting it wrong? Things you've believed all your life or points of view that you held all your life - things you've always been sure about you suddenly find yourself questioning?

I can't say that I recall having that sort of crisis of faith in the middle of the night. I'm sure there have been times when I've lost sleep over something I did or said which I perhaps shouldn't have and worried about what to do next or how it might affect me or people's opinions of me going forward.

It can sometimes be a pain when our minds suddenly wake up in the middle of the night and won't shut off and we find ourselves overcome with needless worry.

I wonder if that wasn't the case for John the Baptist. As we heard in the Gospel reading this morning, he finds himself sitting in prison not for anything he had done wrong, but for doing what he believed God wanted him to do. He'd been called by God, pre-ordained to be a prophet, to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. And he had called people to repentance, to turn from the wrongs they were doing, and pointed them to Jesus who would be looking for followers, for people who desired the keys to the kingdom.

And because he was already anointed or filled with the Holy Spirit while still in the womb, he was never afraid to speak the words he believed God had given him. Even if it meant calling religious leaders a brood of snakes, or King Herod, an adulterer. The latter being what landed him in prison.

The lectionary Gospel reading for today tells of the death of John the baptist and the circumstances leading up to it. John was in prison for offending Herod and his wife. And when Herod had a party for all his entourage and his daughter danced for him to his great delight, he offered her some great gift to thank her. But what did she want? At her mother's urging, she asked for John the Baptist's head.

These were difficult times. All of Judea, Galilee, Israel and Palestine were fed up with Roman rule. There was definite political unrest. But Rome kept the peace, at the end of a sword. And there were also groups of Jewish leaders willing to put up with their rule.

Jesus, also, had his comments for Herod, calling him a fox on one occasion when some Pharisees tried to warn him that Herod was wanting to kill him as well. Herod had shown his might by killing John. He wasn't afraid to make Jesus his next victim. Or so he said. When it came down to it, he let Pilate take the credit for that.

As interesting as that story may be, I wasn't sure what lessons could be learned from it. Perhaps, "don't lose your head?" Or maybe, don't be afraid to say or do what you believe God is calling you to do, no matter the circumstances.

That is a rather risky calling. How many of us are ready to put our lives on the line for something we truly believe in? There have certainly been many - like the Anabaptist martyrs of the 16th century. And many also who take a stand, no matter how foolish it might make them look.

We're probably all aware of the pastor in the city who is fighting the STC Wellness Centre in his neighbourhood and who will be running for city council with homelessness as his platform. I've had coffee with that pastor on a number of occasions and spoke in his church when he and his congregation were considering partnering with Micah Mission to support our clients. That partnership never did come to fruition.

But I encountered him recently while he was visiting in the hospital and we began chatting, catching up. When I told him that I wasn't impressed with his tactics, he told me that he was doing what he believed God wanted him to do, and that his purpose was definitely to do something about the homeless situation in Saskatoon.

I also continue to sit on the Saskatoon Inner City Council of Churches now representing the Spiritual Care department at St Paul's Hospital where I used to represent Micah. The congregations and agencies represented there by pastors, chaplains, and executive directors are currently working together to determine what we can do together to overcome the problems that lead to or are the result of homelessness. At one of those meetings, a member referred to the congregation fighting the wellness centre as the "Crazy Church." I'm sure they have a worse reputation in other circles.

As I told him, I wasn't impressed with his tactics, but, like John the Baptist and the prophets of old, he believes he is following God's will.

And I guess it's such stories that lead to the question I'm asking this morning, "Did John get it wrong?" And that seems to be the question John is asking himself and also asking Jesus in the scripture passage I chose. I've been pondering John's question to Jesus since I encountered it in my daily bible reading back in March. Wondering, what was really behind his question.

As we know, John's life began somewhat similar to Jesus'. An angel was involved. In John's case, the angel appeared to a priest who, together with his wife, was getting on in years. He was no teenager, she, not a young virgin. But was Elizabeth really past the age for childbearing? What does, "on in years" mean?

We're often led to believe they were likely in their 60s or older. Maybe it only meant that if they were going to have children, they'd better do so before it was too late. Though it was assumed or believed that Elizabeth was barren - unable to have children.

In his message to Zechariah, the angel Gabriel suggests that the two of them continued to pray for a son, even though the possibility of them becoming parents was getting more and more remote. But they were still praying. They hadn't completely given up hope. So maybe they weren't as old as we may have traditionally been led to believe. They likely weren't as old as Abraham and Sarah, but who knows?

The Angel's message to Zechariah was something like this:

Your prayers have been answered. Your wife Elizabeth **will** bear you a son, and you will name him John. There will be much joy and celebration at his birth and he will give you joy in your old age. God has big plans for him, so you must raise him as a Nazirite - no wine or strong drink, as he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even in the womb.

So, there were strict instructions for his upbringing. No wine or spirits to drown out the Holy Spirit.

He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before the Lord, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

As the prophet Isaiah foretold, he would lead the way for the Messiah. This was no small thing. God indeed had big plans for him.

Zechariah, unfortunately, had a little trouble believing it all, and was unable to speak for nine months as a result. Perhaps the shock was just too much for him. That gave him plenty of time to observe, to listen, to contemplate the future, and when his son finally arrived, Zechariah was prepared with his own prophecy for John and for Jesus as well.

God has looked favourably on God's people and redeemed them, raising up a mighty saviour for us in the house of David.

Prophecies of old are being fulfilled, prophecies telling that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered God's holy covenant with our ancestor Abraham.

And you, John, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

to give knowledge of salvation to his people
through the forgiveness of their sins.

No pressure, right? It was an auspicious beginning for the new born. But did Zechariah also get it wrong? Jesus never rescued them from their enemies and the hand of those who hate us. Nothing has changed in 2000 years as the Jewish people or at least the Jewish nation find themselves at odds with others. But then, maybe there was a different intent behind those words.

Had all people followed Jesus' words, his call to love one another, then that enmity could have, should have dissolved. But I may be getting ahead of myself.

Upon reaching adulthood, John took these prophetic words upon himself. That which he had heard from his parents, that which he had learned from the prophets, that which he had received from God through the Holy Spirit, he now took to share with the people of Israel.

As I said earlier, he had no fear of political leaders, nor of religious leaders.

When Pharisees and Sadducees came to see what he was all about he called out to them: 'You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? If you, too, are going to be baptised then show yourselves worthy of repentance. You can't rely on your family heritage to save you.

'I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

He foresaw the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended in tongues of fire, but he also saw a coming judgement, suggesting that those who do not take their repentance and baptism seriously by bearing the fruits of the spirit will suffer the fires of hell. Or at least that's one interpretation.

But as he sits in Herod's prison, knowing full well what lies in store for him, he wonders, "did I get it wrong? Is Jesus really the one who was to come?" The things he'd been hearing didn't necessarily match with what John had prophesied. Are you the one I spoke about or do we wait for someone else? Were doubts rising in John's mind? Or did he just want his disciples to meet Jesus for themselves?

And what was Jesus' response?

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who sees all this and believes in me.

John had certainly gotten the people's attention. They were ready for something new. They were ready to join John and Jesus in what might turn out to be a revolution.

But Jesus came about it in a different way. Performing all these miracles, he was taking away the effects of being punished for one's sins, or the sins of one's parents. He healed their afflictions and raised people from the dead! Maybe this was the way of raising an army as well to fight the hated Romans. After all, what did they ever do for us, right?

But more than that, he was preaching good news. Not the doom and gloom that John talked about that awaited those who ignored his message. But Jesus talked about loving not only your neighbours, but your enemies as well. Turning the other cheek, blessed for being persecuted, and for being meek and making peace and all that. Maybe he was starting a revolution. There have been similar successful, peaceful revolutions in history that were successful in overthrowing oppressive governments. We need only think of Ghandi in India, Mandela in South Africa, those who brought down the Berlin wall in Germany, and others.

This didn't seem to be what John had expected. Perhaps he was hoping Jesus would break him out of prison and that together, they would overthrow the Romans. But Jesus instead, is letting him know that God had something else in mind.

In his song, *Small Town*, John Cougar Mellencamp sings about his life in a small town. One line in the song that gets me every time as he sings about what his small town brought him and taught him, is "taught to fear Jesus in a small town." And it always makes me wonder, what, in all we see of Jesus in the gospels, is there to fear? All he ever did was love us, die for us and show us how to really live. And all people seem to want is to try to scare people into heaven. Many of us know what that's about. But like John, we tend to judge people for their mistakes, and some want to go so far as to bring about the end of time when God and Jesus will judge the righteous and the unrighteous, welcoming the righteous into an eternal Heavenly Kingdom and punishing the unrighteous in an eternal Hell. We want everyone to be like us or to suffer if they're not, never realising that we're not perfect either. Jesus was the only perfect one and he seemed to have no interest in judging or punishing people.

I spoke with a relative a couple weeks ago and he made comments suggesting that as Mennonites, we're the ones who've got it right. Everyone else is wrong. I tried to help him see that with both of us being Mennonite, there were things that he and I disagreed on in regard to our Mennonite faith. It's not always as simple as we think it is.

In 2 Samuel, David danced before the Lord, overjoyed that he was finally bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem to make the city the religious and political

capital of the nation of Israel. But his wife was not impressed with his celebrations. She felt he was showing off for and perhaps even exposing himself to all the young women watching. She was expressing her jealousy, but was also critical of his righteous joy. Was he inappropriate? Who knows. But her words point out that in seemingly all situations there's always someone who will judge our actions. They're never good enough, or we're showing love and acceptance to the wrong people. Or we shouldn't be dancing! We're just doing it wrong.

What was it the Psalmist said?

Who has the right to ascend Our God's mountain? Who is allowed to enter Our God's holy place? Those whose hands are clean and whose hearts are pure, who do not worship idols or make false promises.

Our God will bless them; God their Saviour will declare them innocent. Such are the people who seek Our God, who seek your face, God of our ancestors.

David's hands and heart were pure, at least at this occasion. His worship was only for God. He was beloved by God and was welcomed into God's holy place. There was nothing for which he should be ashamed. And nothing for which his wife should be criticising.

So where does that leave us?

There are many injustices that have been overcome in our world. Injustices in many cases, perpetrated by the church and in some of those cases, overcome or removed with the help of the church. But as we well know, there are still many injustices to overcome.

Working at reconciliation, we can one day put the injustices of residential schools, sixties scoop in the past and in our distant memories, but there is much work to do and it will take time.

Helping people to heal from those injustices may one day also help to heal the illnesses that can lead to homelessness. We need to put time, effort, money and love into initiatives to help those in need.

Jesus said, the poor you will always have with you. It wasn't a statement said to suggest that we can ignore them for now. Rather, it was perhaps a reminder that throwing money at the problem isn't going to solve it.

And so, his answer to John is that yes, I am the one who is to come and no, you don't need to look for someone else. I am doing kingdom work. You got people's attention, you prepared them for the coming kingdom. But now, the kingdom has come. People need to see it, to recognize it, and to live it, as I am doing.

So, did John get it wrong? I don't think so. No more than any of the rest of us. He did what he needed to do. He did what he was called to do. Likewise, we need to recognize that even today, the Holy Spirit is vast beyond our understanding and that because the Holy Spirit is so vast, we need to recognize that the Spirit calls and inspires in many different ways. Somehow, there is room in the kingdom for the many and varied opinions about God's will and God's plan, perhaps, even those that are outside the realm of Christianity. After all, if there's room in the kingdom for all of us in the midst of our mistakes and failures and all those things that are associated with Christianity that have nothing to do with being Christ-like.

And furthermore, John exemplifies that it is okay to have doubts and to ask questions in the search of truth.

John's voice was one that speaks of peace. But he did that by challenging the norms, by speaking truth to power, no matter what the end result. After all, that's what prophets do.

John's story is one that encourages us all to continue in the work to which we have been called. And let us not be discouraged by the competing voices but may we live for the praise of God's glory.

Amen.