

Doubting John¹
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When I was a boy, I was a huge Batman fan. I still am. The Batman I grew up with wore a spandex costume and I read about him in comics and saw him in re-runs of the TV show with Adam West and Burt Ward. I loved that show. I had my own Bat-cape which my mother made for me, and I treasured a certain Batman Halloween costume for longer than it fit me. One day something really wonderful happened. It was a life changing moment for a six year old in the 1970's. At the movie theater in a nearby town they had a film festival, and guess what they showed?

Batman, the Movie! I was thrilled! Not only did I get to see my hero in amazing Technicolor; not only did I get to see him larger than life; not only was it a whole movie instead of a half-hour episode—as if *all that* wasn't enough in itself—but *all the best supervillains were in it*—Joker, Penguin, Riddler *and* Catwoman, all in one amazing movie! It was almost too much. But my very favorite thing about the movie, was something I had never noticed when I watched the show on TV, even though it was all the same actors. The big screen must have helped me to see it. When he was out of costume Batman looked *exactly like my father*. Which was amazing, because my Dad was my other big hero as a boy. What are the chances of that? I held that memory dear for many, many years.

Then one day, as a teenager, I saw the Batman Movie again. By then I had different sorts of heroes in my life, and I was kind of on the outs with my Dad. I had begun to doubt that he was a hero, and to suspect that he might just be an ordinary man. And oddly enough, when I saw the movie again, Batman looked only like Adam West, who, for the record, looks *nothing* like my father. On a second glance, neither of them fit the mold of the other at all.

Human beings have always had heroes. Some of the earliest human writings are about heroes and goddesses and gods, and their epic stories. By the time of John the Baptizer and Jesus there were many heroes in sacred writings. Moses led the Hebrews into new life, even splitting the Red Sea with the help of God. Scrawny King David toppled a giant with a slingshot and determination. Queen Esther saved the Jewish people through cunning. And these are just three from a long parade of Jewish heroes. And the cream of the crop has got to be the Prophets. And the superhero of the Hebrew Scriptures must be the Prophet Isaiah.

¹ Many, many thanks to my Tuesday Clergy Bible study group for their help with this sermon. Our ideas have melded into one in many places here!

Historically Isaiah was such a hero, and so fundamental to Jewish culture, that devout Jews quoted him regularly. When Jesus is asked by John's Disciples whether he is indeed the Messiah, Jesus replies by saying: "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."² In his brief response, Jesus references three distinct chapters of Isaiah, indicating knowledge of the entire text which John, and his disciples, must have shared for the quotes to have any meaning.

All the prophets were Jewish superheroes in the days of John and Jesus. They may not have had the spandex and symbols that make modern superheroes obvious at a glance, but you could usually pick them out of a crowd. The third chapter of Matthew tells us that John the Baptizer "...wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey."³ Much has been said of John's attire and diet. Some will tell you that the hair shirt was to encourage a mood of repentance from all the itching. Others insist that it was common clothing to show his solidarity with the poor. John's diet is proclaimed by different Biblical experts as either the everyday food of the peasantry or the rarified cuisine of the Essenes—a sect within Judaism, known for their purity and separation from everyday people. For whatever reason, we hear nothing about Christ's clothing, and his diet is solidly mainstream. This leads me to believe that John's food and frock represent something outside of the ordinary. My bet is that John is wearing the expected costume of a traditional Prophet of his time.

Food and frock were not the only things which could signal the status of Prophet. There was also the matter of Prophetic behavior. Isaiah himself spent three years naked and barefoot to demonstrate his message to the people of Israel.⁴ The prophet Ezekiel conducted a bizarre rite for three hundred ninety days involving mock war equipment and laying on his left side outside Jerusalem while baking multi-grain cakes over cow dung in order to feed himself.⁵ John the Baptizer embraced this tradition by staging his baptisms far away from Jerusalem and taking on a preaching attitude that was high in hyperbole and hellfire. Do you remember what he said to the religious authorities who made the long trip to see him? Here is much of it, to jog your memory:

"You brood of *vipers!* Who warned you to *flee* from the *wrath* to come? Bear fruit *worthy* of repentance...Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water

² Matthew 11:4-5. These verses, along with verse 6, reference Isaiah 29:18-29; 35:5-6; 42:18 and 61:1.

³ Matthew 3:4.

⁴ Isaiah 20:2-4.

⁵ Ezekiel 4:1-15.

for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize 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*.”⁶

You see, this was John’s vision of the Messiah, and that of many folks in his day—not just a prophet, but an absolute superhero, able to swoop down, dispense justice, kick tail, take names and use violence to a good end. If a prophet does some wild things, the Messiah should be super wild. If a prophet baptizes with water, the Messiah must come with *fire*. And not just fire, but unquenchable fire for all the poor souls who don’t make the grade.

This is the hope that John held for Jesus. John knew what a superhero should look like, and he wanted Jesus to fit that mold. Jesus should come and cleanse and chop and burn things till whoever remained was right with God. So when Jesus left his own Baptism and set off into his own ministry, John had high hopes that he would get right to kicking tails and taking names.

But he didn’t, did he? Admittedly, on occasion, Jesus talks about how divisive his ministry will be to the world. He even uses sword and fire language here and there. But look at the shape of Christ’s ministry; look at what he actually does. There is no violence. No trees are chopped down. No one get burned. Instead, a whole lot of healing takes place. Even in unexpected places.

When John asks Jesus “*Are you the one who is to come,*”⁷ he does so because he doubts it. He doubts that Jesus is the right guy after all. Jesus does not fit the mold of what a Messiah should look like and how he should behave. For one thing, where is the rescue party for good old John, who is now behind bars?

Jesus chose his response to John’s doubt filled question precisely. It is a multi-level response. By quoting Isaiah, Jesus references a mutual hero to affirm his prophetic connections. It also spells out Christ’s itinerary by succinctly reviewing his ministry up until that point.

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight...”⁸ That happened with two men just two chapters before this exchange.⁹ Jesus says *Go and tell John* “the lame walk,”¹⁰

⁶ Matthew 3:7b-8, 10-12.

⁷ Matthew 11:3b.

⁸ Matthew 11:4b-5a.

⁹ Matthew 9:27-31.

¹⁰ Matthew 11:5b.

and that happened in the same chapter!¹¹ Jesus says “the lepers are cleansed,”¹² which happened three chapters back.¹³ Again, Jesus says, “the deaf hear, the dead are raised”¹⁴—which also takes place in previous chapters.¹⁵ Finally, Jesus says, “the poor have good news brought to them,”¹⁶ and this is most lavishly presented in the Beatitudes which begin in chapter 5.

Jesus is not only quoting a Prophet, *he is living out and embodying a prophetic vision*. Isaiah’s vision of restored community is being *made real* in the travels of Jesus. The lame walk, the deaf hear, the blind see, God’s shalom is being poured out through Jesus to all who have need; and all of it without violence. Because Jesus knows that no good can come of violence.

Which leads to another reason that John may doubt who Jesus is, because Jesus is healing *everyone*. Not just members of one in crowd or another, but anyone who asks and believes in him. Jesus even heals the servant of a leader of the Roman army—the very same army that oppresses his fellow Jews through violence and domination.¹⁷ Even to *them* Jesus offers healing and shalom. Jesus lives to demonstrate that the vision of the Prophets is most fully realized when it is offered to the whole world, *because we are all God’s children*. And we are all invited into God’s healing and restoring presence.

How exactly does this story prepare us to kneel by the manger on this Sunday in Advent dedicated to rejoicing? Why was this passage chosen for *this* season? It reminds us that violence is not the way of Jesus, who is the *real* superhero. He never throws a punch, hurls a batarang, or uses a winnowing fork. Instead, he demonstrates again and again that God’s healing is for everyone: rich and poor, Jewish and Gentile, near and far; which may be the wildest prophetic behavior ever. And, it also reminds us that it is OK to have doubts from time to time; even of Jesus; because Jesus *will not* curse us for it. Instead, he will keep trying to offer us his grace, healing and shalom. And that is all cause for deep and abiding joy as we make room in our hearts for Jesus.

Amen?

¹¹ Matthew 9:2-8.

¹² Matthew 11:5c.

¹³ Matthew 8:1-4.

¹⁴ Matthew 11:5d-e.

¹⁵ See 4, 8 (implicit deafness healings), and 9.

¹⁶ Matthew 11:5f.

¹⁷ Matthew 8:5-13.

Matthew 11:2-12

2When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” 4Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5the 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.

6And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

7As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8What then did you go out to see?

Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ 11Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.