

Pastor Gregory Paul Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/16/2007, Advent 3A  
Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 11:2-11

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>11</sup>Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

My aim in this sermon is to take quite seriously this teaching of our Lord about those who are greater than John the Baptist. I believe Jesus is speaking of you... that *you* are greater than mighty John the Baptist. To develop this theme, two directions seem natural enough: First I shall argue that John the Baptist is not so great. And second I shall argue that you are!

Only, it is hard for me to raise questions about John the Baptist. You know me well enough by now: I am very conservative when it comes to theological and Biblical matters. And so it feels strange to call into question the standing of someone the Church has always honored. Why, we have a John the Baptist banner right here at Immanuel, and I have always been glad when Advent comes around and we display this fine man.

And so, in the end, I do not mean to belittle John but rather to point out that you and I face a choice, for John and Jesus are different sorts of men.

There is a character in a short story by Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) that puts me in mind of John the Baptist. The story is called "The Two Drovers," and the man akin to the Baptist is the drover named Robin – Robin Oig M'Combich. A "drover" is someone who drives cattle to market. The herd is bought at auction and driven yonder to some farm where the cattle can fatten and then be sold. The driving of the cattle to the farm is a very important part of the economy, for the cattle must arrive safe, traveling over fair distances through land that can be treacherous. The author points out that there is something about

the physical restlessness of the Scottish Highlanders that makes them well suited to be drovers. As Scott puts it:

for the Highlander, a child amongst flocks, is a prince amongst herds, and his natural habits induce him to disdain the shepherd's slothful life, so that he feels himself nowhere more at home than when following a gallant drove of his country cattle...

And amongst these Highland drovers, the most skillful and respected of them then was Robin.

Now Robin had struck up a friendship with an English drover named Harry Wakefield. They often drove their herds together, enjoying each other's company. The tragedy of this tale is that Robin Oig and Harry Wakefield come to blows on their way south from Scotland into England. It was a nonsense quarrel. Neither Robin nor Harry was to blame. They simply were victims of a misunderstanding. But there were mean-hearted men in the tavern who egged Harry on to believe that he had been mistreated by his old friend Robin. Liquor played its role too. At any event, when Robin arrives at the tavern, Harry is persuaded to fight Robin.

Now, Robin is a brave and proud man, but he is not skilled in boxing and he does not want to fight. Harry, on the other hand, is a champion boxer. He is much larger and stronger than Robin, and at the urging of the crowd he knocks Robin to the floor twice.

The disaster is that Robin gets up from the floor, hikes for two hours to retrieve his “dirk,” his knife, marches back into the tavern, strides up to his old friend Harry and plunges his dirk into the man’s heart. And so Harry dies.

Robin turns himself into the constable, and there is a trial. At the trial, the judge expresses great sympathy for Robin. He understands the pride of the man and the way Robin had been humiliated by Harry and the crowd in the tavern. He also understands that in the morality of the Highlanders of those times, the rule of law was a much more private and personal matter, and what Robin had done would not have seemed so strange in his own land. But this land where the crime had occurred was England, and England could not abide such private justice.

The story ends with these few sentences:

The jury, according to [the venerable judge’s] instructions, brought in a verdict of Guilty; and Robin Oig M’Combich, *alias* M’Gregor, was sentenced to death and left for execution, which took place accordingly. He met his fate with great firmness, and acknowledged the justice of his sentence. But he repelled indignantly the observations of those who accused him of attacking an unarmed man. “I give a life for the life I took,” he said, “and what can I do more?”

That’s the end of the story. Robin lived according to a stern justice and he was willing to die according to that justice. It is an impressive morality, but not the morality of Jesus.

Now, there are differences between Jesus and John, including socio-economic differences. John had been born into an esteemed priestly family, with all its privileges. While Jesus was born of a village maid and raised by a carpenter.

And there were differences of piety, such that John was an austere man, who lived on whatever he could find in his self-chosen desert, so that John ate locusts and wild honey and wore rough clothing, while Jesus traveled and taught in towns and villages and joined in suppers when they were offered.

But those are fairly small matters – the differences of sociological-economic background and forms of piety. A much larger matter, it seems to me, is simply that John the Baptist was not a disciple of Jesus. We can go through the names of the Twelve, but the Baptist was not there. I guess he *could have* followed Jesus. He could have let Jesus choose the steps and he follow along behind. He could have listened and learned from the sweet preaching of Jesus. But there is no evidence that he did any of these things. I mean, John had his own disciples (Mark 2:18, Luke 11:11), and John’s ministry seems to have been independent of that of Jesus, so that in the book of Acts, we find Gentiles who believe in the LORD, the God of Israel, but they are not yet Christians. Why not? Well, because they have been baptized with the baptism of John, but not in the name of Jesus. Apollos, St. Paul’s great colleague, was one of them. It was only after Paul preached about Jesus and baptized these Gentiles in his name that these folk received the Holy Spirit:

<sup>3</sup>And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John’s baptism. <sup>4</sup>Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. <sup>5</sup>When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup>And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. (Acts 19:3-6, RSV)

But chiefly the reason I wonder about John the Baptist is that there seems to be a fundamental philosophical or spiritual difference between John and Jesus. I suspect that John was offended by Jesus. He was offended not by what Jesus did, but what he failed to do.

For example, right in this morning's Gospel story we see Jesus quote Holy Scripture in a way that might have put John's nerves on edge. Poor John is languishing in prison. In fact, he will soon die a horrible death there, with his head cut off at the mere whim of a girl and because of the weakness of King Herod. So, John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask whether Jesus is in fact the Messiah. And Jesus answers by quoting Isaiah — 26:19, 19:18, 61:1 — along with this passage from Chapter 35:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup>the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.

But, you see, that is not quite what Isaiah said. The old prophet also spoke of justice. Indeed, he had spoken of vengeance:

<sup>3</sup>Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. <sup>4</sup>Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come *with vengeance, with the recompense of God*. He will come and save you.” <sup>5</sup>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup>then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. (Isa 35:3-5)

It's a comforting passage, but, after all, it does speak of vengeance.

Let me mention another example of where Jesus tends to edit the preaching of Isaiah.

Remember our Lord's hometown sermon — the sermon he preached when he returned to Nazareth, and was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus read from that scroll, but only partway. He said this:

<sup>18</sup>The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, <sup>19</sup>To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19, KJV)

The problem is that Jesus cuts the quote short right in the middle of the sentence. Isaiah does not say simply “to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD,” but also, “and the day of vengeance of our God”:

<sup>2</sup>To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God... (Isaiah 61:2)

The problem with Jesus, from John's point of view, might have been that Jesus keeps forgetting about the vengeance part of the kingdom. John is like Robin Oig of the Highlands. John is willing to be brave. He is willing to preach against the adultery of King Herod. He is even willing to die and to suffer his terrible beheading. But don't preach to John about a kingdom of God that holds no vengeance.

I have concluded that we must make a choice here. Either we are followers of John or of Jesus.

Someday, it might come your way that you stand before the one who has offended you, with your dirk concealed in the folds of your plaid. Your black knife lies at hand. Maybe that knife takes the form of cutting words, or power to cause your opponent to sink or to swim, or maybe it is the playground and your knife takes

the blunt form of a fist. Whatever the fashion of the dirk, you have the power to do your opponent harm.

What I say to you is, do not take the law into your own hands. Or better, even in that moment of provocation and opportunity, remember the law of our Lord:

<sup>39</sup>But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:39, KJV)

John the Baptist might scowl at such meekness, but remember that you belong to Jesus, not John.

Again, I do not mean you when you are exercising the public office of justice. I am not speaking of you soldiers, police, FBI agents, Assistant District Attorneys, and judges, for we have all of these vocations connected with our parish. I do not mean to interfere with your duties, but rather to urge you and each of us to abide by the apostolic call:

<sup>18</sup>If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. (Romans 12:18, KJV)

And know this, that in turning toward Jesus, you are not turning away from justice. You are simply seeking another way. For you see, Jesus does not forget about John's concern. He does not forget about humanity's cry for justice, or even creation's cry for justice. No, he does not forget. Rather, he takes up his cross and works for justice in a way quite contrary to John's way. Jesus is just as brave as John. Even braver, I say, for Jesus suffered a more cruel death than John, and Jesus could have escaped, only if he had escaped — if he had summoned his legion of angels to save him — then we would have suffered the ruination of our lives. And Jesus does not want that kind of justice! Jesus strives toward justice by way of self-sacrifice and steadfast love, paying the cost in his own body that one day things shall be set right.

It is the way of Jesus that God the Father and God the Son have vindicated through the Resurrection. During Advent, we are waiting for Jesus, not for John. We have been baptized into Jesus, not into John. The ways of Jesus are our ways, and the resurrection of Jesus means that we should turn to those ways with renewed commitment and hope. To Jesus Christ, the cause of our hope, be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.