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## Are You the One?

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Luke 7:18-35

*[Messengers from John the Baptist]*

<sup>18</sup> *The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples<sup>19</sup> and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”<sup>20</sup> When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’”<sup>21</sup> Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind.<sup>22</sup> And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.<sup>23</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”*

<sup>24</sup> *When John’s messengers had gone, 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?<sup>25</sup> What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces.<sup>26</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.<sup>27</sup> This is the one about whom it is written,*

*‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’*

<sup>28</sup> *I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”<sup>29</sup> (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John’s baptism.<sup>30</sup> But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves.)*

<sup>31</sup> *“To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?<sup>32</sup> They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,*

*‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.’*

<sup>33</sup> *For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’;<sup>34</sup> the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.”*

Assuming your calendar tracked how you actually spent your time, to what would it say you are giving your life? Where goeth our time goeth our life.

John the Baptist was in prison. He was giving his life, every minute of every day of his life, to a cause he thought worthy of his whole life: the restoration of Israel – Israel the chosen, holy people of God; Israel an independent, self-ruled, obedient-to-Torah nation; free of religious corruption and political collusion with the enemies of God. THAT Israel.

John was a prophet in the fashion of the ancient biblical prophets such as Elijah and Jeremiah, but with a calling all his own: forerunner and announcer of the Messiah himself, the One sent by God for the restoration of Israel and the redemption of her people. A calling, I believe, John must always have half-expected to die trying to fulfill. It was the Roman Empire, after all, to whom he was called to say, “*YOU are doomed, the Messiah will deliver us from YOU.*”

Expectations. What almost always gets us in the end. Expectations are the ruin of many a romance, many a basketball season, many a knitting project, many an election. That continental divide between how I imagine something will turn out and how it actually turns out. The sermons I write in my mind are so much better than the ones I write with my hands. How I think my hair/house/yard looks is so much better than how it really does. At the gym (!) my mind says, “Do this!” My lungs and muscles say, “Yeah, whatever.”

The borders of the gap between John’s expectations and his reality are set in chapters 3 and 7 of Luke. From his own preaching and his membership among the Essenes, it’s fair to assume he *expected* the Messiah to lead an overthrow of Roman occupation in Israel, the re-establishment of religious integrity and righteousness, and holiness in the Temple. However militant or violent John expected the overthrow (or rebellion) would be is debatable. But *restoration* was most certainly the aim. And it was John’s calling.

So, when John is in prison, about to lose his head for his part in a rebellion, which hadn’t really even flowered into a rebellion yet, I hear him ask a very sensible question: “*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*” – a question Jesus willingly indulges. “*Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.*”<sup>23</sup> *And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*”

No sooner had John’s people left to tell him what Jesus had done and said, than Jesus turned to the crowd to talk about John. He sounds really defensive, don’t you think? “*What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?*”<sup>25</sup> *What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces.*<sup>26</sup> *What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.*<sup>27</sup> *This is the one about whom it is*

*written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’* <sup>28</sup> *I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’*

So defensive. His point is made and still he goes on, being *Offensive* to those who had rejected John's baptism: *When John fasted you called him a demon. When I ate and drank you called me a glutton. You wouldn't dance at a wedding or weep at funeral. You constantly change the rules to suit yourselves. You are impossible to please. You have no idea what you want or need of God.* I'm a little stumped about what Jesus is referring to here. He suggests a history between John and his religious opponents we can only guess at, since Luke doesn't detail them.

Plain to me, however, is how quickly Jesus jumps to defend John. To interrupt with whatever conclusion the crowd might draw about John on their own. What conclusions? That he was weak of faith or full of doubt? That maybe he wasn't the prophet and the rebel he fancied himself after all? Or that maybe he shouldn't have been *so political* in his preaching, bad-mouthing Herod like he did?

We can't say. We've no way of knowing what Jesus' opponents were thinking about John, only that Jesus defends John's asking, “Are you the One?” And in his defense of John, I find a defense not only of John's difficulty with the expectations of faith, but also of our own. Or at least of mine. John's conundrum, it seems to me, is the tension between his determination to be faithful to the Cause of Israel and his anxiety about whether or not the cause itself is even real.

Jesus isn't turning out to be the kind of “Messiah” John expected him to be. What do we know about what John expected? In his preaching in chapter 3, John described him as, *“the one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”* Granted, he's in prison, but he's not heard a thing about fire or anything like it.

When he sent people to ask Jesus directly, the answer wasn't a straightforward yes or no, but: *“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.* <sup>23</sup> *And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”* Nothing at all about forks or fire. And the space between John's expectation and Jesus' reality became a more and more difficult place to occupy. So that, the longer his imprisonment lasted – the closer his execution drew – I can only imagine the more chaotic he felt. Chaotic for the want of knowing that he was where he was supposed to be. I don't think John wanted OUT of prison. I think he wanted reassurance he was supposed to be there, that his impending death was part of the larger project to which he'd already committed.

He doesn't need to be rescued.

He needs to be reassured.

Is he doubting? Maybe. I guess. But *doubt* isn't my favorite word. My first-grade neighbor told me this week he's learning fractions. "Oh man, fractions are hard," he said. Nobody would say that kid is really *doubting* math. I would offer that John is learning faith in a whole new place of human experience: prison. Not just prison. Death row prison. Is he supposed to know how to do faith in that place the first day or week or year he's there? How in the world could he?

It takes strength he doesn't have yet, information, insight, tranquility, transcendence, courage, imagination, and maybe even vocabulary he doesn't have yet. As disciples we are supposed to change and grow. We are meant to be MORE Christian than we were a year ago. To be more generous. To be more selfless. To be more humble. To incur more worldly abuse without complaint. To suffer more, but still cheerfully. And to sit just as calmly for longer and longer stretches of time in those spaces where our expectations and our reality have very, very little in common.

Because right there, friends, right there is the place deep faith grows. Jesus doesn't change, does he? Jesus doesn't change for John. Jesus' answer to John's question is THE answer. Non-negotiated. John asked. Jesus answered. John adjusted.

At least we think he did. We don't know his mind, only that he stayed in prison and was executed within months. We don't know if he was at peace, only that he was faithful. Jesus called him *great* and said the least of us will be greater than him. I can't imagine how that could be, except we know Christ risen, meaning we have even less to fear than John. May it be our privilege to live in Christ and to die in Christ even as he did.