

## PREPARE THE WAY

Sky View. June 28, 2006. During my mulching time this morning – that is, the time between waking up and getting out of bed – I had such rich, fresh thoughts running through my mind that I could picture myself happily occupied at the computer for days to come. (I did wonder briefly if such thoughts would continue to come when I could no longer type; I figured they would. With God the well never runs dry!)

An incident from yesterday, when I gave a piece of paper with one complimentary sentence on it to a woman whose mother had just died, started a pleasant sequence in my head. I reviewed how the giving of the compliment had led to a brief but wonderful visit with the woman whose name I do not know. Later I heard her tell what I had done to the nurse, who replied, “She’s a positive person.” In the evening, as aides entered my room, one said, “I heard about the note you gave Alice’s daughter.” Inwardly I rejoiced in the Lord, for that is how I had determined to live my life: obedient to God, who, I believe, assigned me to write that note, and relating to others in a way that advances the kingdom of God. We never know how widely the ripples from a kind gesture – even a friendly smile – may flow. The words “Prepare the way for the Lord” came to mind, continuing the chain of thought.

That sentence is associated with John the Baptist, one of my favorite Bible personalities, a man whose main purpose in life was to get people ready for Jesus. One thought lead to another:

-- “John is such a clear example of a lifestyle I have been trying to explain.”

-- “Once I gave a sermon on this topic. Copies are in my file in George and Janet’s house.”

-- “Why, that sermon has to be on my computer! I can read it today!”

-- “I wonder if that sermon could be incorporated into an essay about living John’s way of life all the way from childhood into old age?”

And then to my mind’s eye came a long-forgotten picture of a folder filled with sheets of tablet paper and probably stored in the filing cabinet I mentioned before. Thirty or more years ago I had thought of writing a book about John the Baptist. Jesus gave him such high praise that I felt he was a man worth studying. I sat down with my Bible, a concordance, a tablet and pens and began to write out all the Scriptures I could find about John, from both the Old and New Testaments. I completed the job, put the papers in a folder, thought about them from time to time and then forgot the project. But I did make John one of my role models, and his life and his message became an important part of the Bible overview seminars that I was to teach later on.

Still in bed awaiting my aide, I recalled Psalm 37:4: *Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.* Rather than thinking that God gives to those who delight in him anything their hearts desire, I have long thought that God puts into their hearts special desires that he intends to fulfill. Certainly God wanted me to know and emulate John. Was the desire to write about him also from God? Maybe it was not to be a book but an essay and not then but now! By the time I got dressed and into my chair, I was filled with happiness, eager to face my day.

I found the sermon! What helps to make this unusual is that in the years when I was preaching, I usually spoke from notes, not a printed text. I have notebooks full of outlines and jottings but very few developed like this one from November 13, 2002. At the time I was attending the United Methodist Church at Shrub Oak, NY. Five Methodist churches in the area had been getting together for a series of cluster services during Advent and Lent. Held on Wednesday evenings, a potluck supper was first on the agenda, followed by a service in which a talk was to be given by someone other than the pastor. A committee had met to pick a theme verse and then each church

went about planning how they wanted to develop the theme, for we rotated locations.

The verse chosen for Advent in 2002 was Isaiah 40:3: *A voice of one calling, "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."* The emphasis was to be on "Prepare the way for the Lord." As I write this I am recalling another poignant piece of the story. After church one Sunday in September, 2002 Lester, a committee member representing our congregation, came to me, told me the theme and said, "I strongly feel that you are to give the message. Will you do it?" I said I would. Because he was in a hurry, Lester told me he'd call me the next evening and we would talk.

What a wonderful conversation we had Monday night! Both of us were excited about the cluster service which he would moderate and at which I would speak. Then Wednesday morning I got a phone call from Cliff, another member of the church, telling me Lester had suddenly died Tuesday night! We really don't know what a day may bring, do we? The cluster service was moderated by Shirley, Lester's widow. And who would have guessed that two years later a disease would have taken away my ability to speak?

Here now is my sermon from that night. It will become obvious that at least two cluster services were held before ours. I'm inserting the Scripture passages. In the original I just wrote the references and read them from my Bible, making this what I call a read / tell sermon. As for the closing thoughts on celebrating Christmas, I decided to include them here as written, trusting that some may benefit from them.

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### Prepare the Way for the Lord

It is impossible to exhaust the Scriptures. Each church has addressed the assigned topic in different ways, valuable ways, and yet there is so much more to say. We already know that the prophet Isaiah was speaking about John the Baptist through the inspiration of God. Tonight I am going to examine the Scriptures to see how John went about preparing the way for the Lord and then try to apply John's life principles to us, so that we might do the same.

The first Scripture introduces both John and Jesus Christ, giving similarities and differences between them. John 1:1-9; 14,15:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.*

*There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.... John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"*

Notice that both were sent from God, although in different ways:

- Jesus Christ was God in the flesh, the Eternal Word in a human body.
- John was not the Christ, but was a miracle child born to Zechariah and Elizabeth for a special purpose.

Luke 1 tells the story of the miracle surrounding John's birth. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both descendants of Aaron, which would give Zechariah the duties of the priesthood. Both of them

were upright in the sight of the Lord, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly (verse 6). They had one sorrow, though: they had never had any children, because Elizabeth was barren, and now they were both "well along in years" (verse 7). One day Zechariah was in the temple burning incense when he was stunned to find the angel Gabriel standing next to him. Listen to the message the angel brought to the startled priest:

*"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:13-17).*

So John was known to God even before his conception. And before his birth he had an assignment from God: he was to make ready a people prepared for the Lord, partly by challenging people to change their ways. And so John was born, the only child of elderly parents. Six months later a woman named Mary, who was a relative of Elizabeth, gave birth to Jesus. This means, of course, that John and Jesus were also related.

All his life John must have known that he had special work to do for God, and in order to do this work, he had to prepare himself. Luke 1:80 says, *"The child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel."* By then his parents may have died. And then he got the signal from God that it was time to start his ministry. Mark 1:1-8 says:

*The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" – "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"*

*And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

The Israelites, especially the priests and Levites, knew that a Messiah had been promised, and wondered if John might be the one. They came to question John.

*He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'" (John 1:20-23).*

Notice John's humility. His job was to point to Jesus, not to himself. John 1:35-37 gives us an example: *The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. John was glad when his followers left him to follow Jesus! What a man!*

How effective was John? He was primarily an evangelist. Did his work prepare the way for the Lord? Two Scripture passages will answer that question. Here is John 10:40-42: *Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. Here he stayed and many people came to him. They said, "Though John never performed a miraculous*

*sign, all that John said about this man was true.” And in that place many believed in Jesus. And now Luke 7:29,30: (All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.) John did his work well. Those who responded to his message were ready for Jesus. Yes, John was very effective!*

Near the end of his life John sent his followers to Jesus with a question. Jesus sent them back to John with an answer and then spoke to the crowds: *What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the man about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist (Matthew 11:7-11a). What a wonderful illustration of James 4:10 - “Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.” How our Lord elevated his humble servant!*

Now what can we learn from John? How can we prepare people for the Lord? Like John, we, too, live in a “desert place,” a “wilderness,” and the people around us - our friends, colleagues, neighbors, those with whom we mingle - need the Lord!

1. John was related to Jesus; we must be, too. Just being born physically is not enough. We need a second birth, a spiritual birth, a personal relationship with Jesus before we can ever hope to work for him. Jesus said, “I am the way . . .”. We must be on the way ourselves if we want to prepare the way for others to meet Jesus. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,” the apostles preached, “and you will be saved.” Have you experienced God’s salvation? Do you believe in Jesus? This is the absolutely essential starting point for the Christian life of service in God’s Kingdom. But it’s only a starting point! There’s more!

2. John was secure! He knew who he was and what he was to do. He was not being arrogant when he said “I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’” Not at all! Rather he knew the truth and the truth set him free to be and to do what God intended him to be and to do. JOHN WAS WORKING FROM GOD’S APPROVAL, NOT FOR IT! What a difference that makes! How about you? Are you secure tonight in the fact that you belong to God, now and forever? Have you stopped worrying about what will happen to you when you die or when Jesus returns? Do you know you will be going to the place that Jesus is preparing for his own? Jesus said that anyone who believes in him would not perish, but have everlasting life. Do you think Jesus would go back on his word? Of course not! The Holy Spirit is given as a deposit to those who believe in Jesus, guaranteeing “our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession - to the praise of his glory” Paul says in Ephesians 1:14. God wants us to know that we know that we know, as a previous speaker put it.

3. John was prepared, he was ready, to do the work God gave him to do. He had spent time alone with God and had learned from God. He was willing to be different. He stood out from the crowd; he looked like a prophet. What about us? How much time do we spend studying the Bible? Have we gone beyond knowing the Bible to knowing God? Do we spend time alone with God? Are we willing to be different, to be marked out as a prophet, one who is able to point people to Jesus? Are we growing up, becoming mature?

4. John was serious, single-minded, focused on his message. His life was in line with his work: he was godly. Could this be said of us? Can we say with Paul, “This one thing I do . . .”? And are our lives such that they do not distract from the message, the Good News? Listen to the words of Paul from Colossians 3: *Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated on the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed. You used to walk in*

*these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips. Peter says to us, "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of Christ and speed its coming (2 Peter 3:11,12). If we want to prepare the way of the Lord, the way we live our lives does matter!*

5. John knew who Jesus was and where he belonged in relation to Jesus. He said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" and also: "I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals." What about us? Do we have such deep respect for Jesus that we know our place is at his feet? Do we, so to speak, take off our shoes in his presence, for we know we are standing on holy ground? Do we keep our place as created beings before our Creator? Does it amaze us that God should even care for us, poor wretches that we are? A deep awe of God leads to humility, the kind that John exhibited, the kind that leads to God's lifting us up.

Closing thoughts:

We are not told in the Bible that we must celebrate the birth of Jesus at all. His death, yes (with bread and the cup), but not his birth. Our culture, on the other hand, says we should spend about two months of the year on Christmas engaged in all kinds of activities: baking, cooking, buying, buying, spending until we are in debt, wrapping, cleaning, decorating, sending cards, giving and going to parties, buying some more, working until we are too tired and busy to even attend church services, much less take part in them. How sad to hear Christians speak of dreading Christmas! Are we afraid of being different? We don't have to follow the dictates of our secular culture!

On the other hand, the Bible does not tell us it is wrong to celebrate Christmas either. We really should marvel at the birth of Jesus, for it shows the deep love of God for us. If Jesus Christ had not been born, he could not have died for us and we would be without hope. We could think of Christmas as a great time of opportunity for God's people to prepare the way for the Lord, for there are those who are willing once a year to listen, to put themselves in a place where the good news is preached, to come to church. With joy and peace in our hearts we can send cards and notes with messages of hope for all. With the songs we sing, with beautiful decorations, with thoughtful (not necessarily expensive) gifts, with good deeds, with the way we conduct ourselves, the way we treat people, we could really prepare people for the work only God can do in them: the work of salvation. Take this as a challenge. Let's do it! Let's prepare the way for the Lord! And to God be the glory. Amen.

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July 2, 2006. That is the conclusion of the sermon, but it is certainly not the end of my thoughts about John! I imagine the reason I wrote out the above sermon was to be sure I stayed within my time limits. There are no time or page limits for my essays. In fact, because of my physical condition, I want to say everything I feel is necessary about a subject, for I may not get another chance to do so. Here, then, are further thoughts about this remarkable man, some of which have been in my head for years and some fresh from today's mulching time - much to my delight!

It's fun for me to look back over my life and find in childhood the seeds of something that I still enjoy. I have always liked riddles, for example. When I was a child I had a tablet in which I wrote all the riddles I knew. I can still remember some of them sixty years later! I liked the way they made you think; the more clever, the better. There are some good riddles in the Bible, too. There's one that Samson made up about the lion and the honey in the book of Judges and one that Jesus used in talking with Martha after her brother died – and of which I wrote in the essay "The Riddle." Long ago I added on the tablet of my mind a third one to join the other two, the one that I think John the Baptist used repeatedly: "He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me." I can imagine people wondering how someone could come after John if he was before him. And how could this man have surpassed John if he hadn't arrived yet? I can also imagine John smiling as people pondered that riddle. In time he would reveal the answer to them.

Lately I have been wondering about John's personality. Did he find pleasure in his life and ministry? Gabriel told Zechariah that John would be a joy and delight to him and to Elizabeth and that many would rejoice because of his birth. From this I picture him as a happy, delightful child, the joy not only of his parents but also of their wide circle of friends. Besides much love, I think there was a lot of laughter in their house. Maybe they told each other riddles! Surely the parents often told their young son the circumstances of his birth, bringing laughter and hugs. His inner happiness would be a great asset to balance the serious nature of John's assigned mission in life: preparing the way for the Lord.

Yes, I think John really enjoyed his life, including his work. I believe he smiled inside when he heard the buzz going on around him: "Who is this man? Could he be the Christ? Or Elijah? Where is the one who has surpassed him?" He smiled because the people were thinking, wondering, talking – and that is just what he had intended. What better way to get people ready for the Water of Life than to make them thirsty? John's appearance, his lifestyle and his message all had people curious, thirsty. Crowds were gathering around daily to hear him speak. Oh, the joy when many of them followed him into the river for baptism, thus admitting that they were sinners in need of forgiveness. These would surely be ready for the Lamb of God, the One to come!

When Jesus appeared in the river one day, John knew the man standing before him was not a sinner. Why would he want to be baptized? And by John? Surely the reverse would be more appropriate! After Jesus persuaded him that this was the right thing to do and the act was completed, John saw the spirit of God descend on Jesus like a dove. Now all doubts he may have had were gone, for the dove was the sign that God had arranged with John whereby he would know for sure that this was the Christ, God in the flesh. Soon, now, the riddle could be explained. One day he pointed to Jesus and said to his followers, "This is the one my riddle is all about." In my imagination I hear him say, "Jesus was born six months after I was and his public ministry is just beginning, while mine started months ago. In these ways he came after me. But he is also eternal, always existing, and his work began with creating. So in both ways he certainly was before me. As for surpassing me, why, I am not even worthy to untie his sandals!"

Not all of John's work was easy, though, and not everybody liked him, especially the people he criticized. Chief among these were Herod and his wife Herodias, who had been his brother Philip's wife. Because John confronted Herod, telling him it was not lawful for him to have Herodias, Herod had the prophet arrested, bound and put into prison. Both of them were angry enough to kill John, yet Herod was strangely conflicted as well. He had to admit that John was a holy and righteous man. What's more, he liked to come and listen to him, though he was puzzled by what he heard.

So John, with his inner reservoir of joy intact, continued preparing the way for the Lord even in his prison cell, and in that he could further rejoice. Not only did Herod visit, but he also had loyal followers who stood by him. News from the outside sometimes reached John's ears.

*When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not fall away on account of me" (Matthew 11:2-6).*

I have often heard this incident explained as proof that John, thinking death may be imminent, began to have doubts about the identity of Jesus. If that is true – and it may be – please notice that Jesus did not rebuke him in any way. Instead, as the disciples were leaving, Jesus heaped the high praise on John that I mentioned in the sermon part of this essay. What a eulogy! Somehow the thought of John's doubting never seemed reasonable to me. Here is what I imagine happened:

John had been so pleased whenever his followers believed his message to the extent of leaving

him to follow Jesus. He knew they would forever be grateful to him for showing them the way, but now his active part in their lives was over; henceforth they would receive their teaching directly from Jesus. For some reason the group of disciples that stayed with John during his confinement were causing him concern. Did they, perhaps, have doubts about Jesus? What would happen to them after John died? And so, good teacher that he was, John devised a plan that would get the disciples into the presence of Jesus, where they could talk with and observe him for themselves. I think John felt pleasure as the plan was carried out.

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I have long been fascinated by the connection between John and the prophet Elijah, who lived and worked about seven hundred years before John. His story is told from 1 Kings 17 through 2 Kings 2. The book of Malachi, written about four hundred years before John's time, ends with a strange prophecy in which the Lord Almighty is speaking:

*"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents: or else I will come and strike the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:5,6).*

This, too, is a puzzle, a riddle, as well as a threat. It certainly does make the coming of Elijah seem desirable, far better than having God curse the land! And so the people began to look for Elijah to return. I imagine one reason this seemed like a possibility to them was that Elijah really didn't die; God sent a chariot of fire and a whirlwind to remove him from the earth. Perhaps he would come back in a miraculous way, the people may have thought. Gabriel began to answer the riddle when he spoke to Zechariah about John, the son he and Elizabeth were going to have: *"He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous" (Luke 1:17).* Later on, when people asked John the Baptist "Are you Elijah?" he truthfully answered "I am not," for he had always been John. Had they asked him if he fulfilled Malachi's prophecy, he would have had to say "Yes, I do."

The final answer to this riddle is given by Jesus in Matthew 17. Some time after the death of John the Baptist, Jesus took his disciples Peter, James and John up a high mountain where they witnessed two astonishing events: 1. The transfiguration of Jesus when his face and clothing became shiny and bright and 2. The arrival of Moses and Elijah to have a talk with Jesus! On the way down the mountain, Jesus told his disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen until he had been raised from the dead. They took advantage of this intimate moment to ask a question that had been on their minds:

*"Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciple understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist (verses 10-13).*

This settles my mind, too. It doesn't matter that I might not fully understand the answer Jesus gave; what matters to me is that the disciples understood. God had a reason for giving Malachi a prophecy in code. What was there about Elijah's life and work that made some people think John might be Elijah? (I am assuming here that people knew Elijah's story. Perhaps some only knew of the prophecy and wondered if any new prophet might fulfill it.)

First of all, both men dressed in a way that made them recognizable by their clothing. Once King Ahaziah of Israel sent messengers to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, as to whether or not he would recover from his illness. Prompted by God, Elijah intercepted them and gave them God's answer to their question: The king would die. Ahaziah asked the messengers to describe the man who met them. "He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist," they

said. "That was Elijah the Tishbite," the king replied. And about seven hundred years later, John would wear similar clothing.

God did not give general instructions as to how his prophets were to dress, although I wouldn't be surprised if these two were following God's command. I've been thinking about the meaning of the unusual clothing and have found them to be symbolic of a "two sides of the coin" teaching. On the one side, God's prophets must be able to:

- stand out as different and to handle the consequences of being noticed;
- be comfortable alone or with just a few companions;
- spend much time with God, communing, being taught, receiving instructions;
- be received and acclaimed by some and rejected - even hated - by others.

Just as prophets must come to terms with being different, so the people who interact with them must process the implications of friendship with one who is different. Thinking of Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus (the Prophet with a capital P), we can see the small number of faithful, close friends they had. Disciples gather around for a time, but even they may leave when the teaching becomes too hard, too personal or the situation looks dangerous. Thus prophets must learn to be alone without becoming lonely. They must be content with God as their Best Friend and consider other friends that come in and go out of their lives as bonuses; if not, they risk depression.

The other side of the coin is that prophets must blend in with others and work as part of a team. How can you do that when you stand out wherever you are? A deliberate mindset is involved here, a willingness to submerge yourself and encourage others, so that together you may achieve a goal. Secular examples come easily to mind, such as team sports, where the goal is winning. My personal experience along these lines, however, has been in music, both vocal and instrumental, where good sound is the goal, and where blending tones is given as much importance as hitting the right notes.

How well I remember the first year I took accordion lessons at the Carrozza Music Center in Yorktown Heights. The studio had a senior accordion band that played beautiful, classical music under the direction of Mike, who was also my teacher. Because I had a music background, I progressed rapidly on my new instrument. After six or seven months Mike asked me if I would like to join his band. I was overjoyed! The music was divided into four parts, with first being the hardest and fourth the easiest, but all important. Mike would promote his students to harder parts as they advanced in their studies. He started me as a third part player. I did stand out as different in the band in one respect. The year was 1963; I was a 29 year old mother of three while all the rest were teenagers! None of us minded, though, and I felt such joy in doing my part well. After a while Mike thought he should promote me to the second part. I tried it, but found it difficult. What's more, Mike missed having me as a third; I missed it as well, knowing I had made a real contribution there. "Let me go back to being a third," I suggested. "I'd rather be a good third than to have the honor that goes with being a second." And that's what we did - for the good of the band.

In God's family everyone is a member of the team, called the Kingdom of God. Our director / manager / coach is God and he has given us each a part to play in promoting the Kingdom, with the promise that he will train us how to do our jobs well. If God wants some of his players (such as prophets) to work in the spotlight for a time, the rest of us need to be supportive, knowing God has a Master Plan and never makes a mistake. When the "stars" are not in the spotlight, they must blend back in with the majority of God's players, happy to be contributing members of the team. Many times in my life I thought of the phrase "I'd rather be a good third" when taking a secondary role and encouraging others to shine. The joy comes from seeing the Kingdom of God advancing across the field of this world and hearing the beautiful music that accompanies the movement.

Once Elijah had a chance to really shine as a solo player in God's scheme of things and oh, how well he did! In this incident, told in 1 Kings 18, we see another connection between Elijah and John: both were sent to turn the hearts of the people back to the Lord, and had some success in doing



so. And still another: both incurred the wrath of a ruling couple. In Elijah's case they were King Ahab and his wife Jezebel; in John's, they were Herod and Herodias. In both instances the women were the more angry, certainly wanting the prophet murdered. Herodias got her wish; Jezebel did not.

The story I have in mind takes place in the third year of a famine caused by lack of rain, both judgments that the Lord had sent on Israel for abandoning God and embracing idolatry. The leader in this movement was Jezebel, who personally supported 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. King Ahab had also abandoned the Lord to follow Baal, and many Israelites followed suit – though not all. Obadiah was one man who remained faithful. He is described as a devout believer in the Lord, one who had worshipped the Lord since his youth. There were also a large number of God's prophets active in Israel. When Jezebel began systematically to have them murdered, Obadiah hid 100 of them in two caves and kept them supplied with food and water. Elijah knew Obadiah; he also knew about the 100 prophets (1 Kings 18:13).

Elijah proposed to Ahab that there be a gathering on Mount Carmel that would include Jezebel's 850 prophets as well as people from all over the nation. Ahab agreed. When the day came, Elijah told the people that it was time for them to make up their minds whom they wanted to follow, the Lord or Baal. To help them know which one was God, Elijah explained to them the simple contest he had in mind. The people would provide two bulls. The 450 prophets of Baal would prepare one bull for sacrifice and he would prepare the other one. Both would lay the sacrifice on wood but light no fire. They would call on Baal to send fire to burn the sacrifice and he would call on the Lord. One detail: they would go first since there were so many of them and Elijah was alone. "Baal and the Lord: can we agree that the one who sends fire is God?" Elijah asked, and the people thought the plan was good. (Wasn't the prophet doing a beautiful job of preparing the way for the Lord?)

From morning until evening Baal's prophets did everything they could think of to get their god to respond to them, to no avail. And then it was Elijah's turn. To stir the memories of the Israelites, he built an altar to the Lord using twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob. Next he dug a trench around the altar. After he put the wood and the parts of the bull in place, he had the entire project thoroughly drenched with water, so much that the surrounding trench was filled. As soon as he finished praying, *"the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, 'The Lord – he is God! The Lord – he is God!'"* (This to me is like the people responding to John's call for repentance by being baptized in the Jordan River.)

Elijah ordered the people to seize the prophets of Baal, whom they now realized was a false god. All of them were brought down to the valley and killed. Jezebel had not been on the mountain. When Ahab told her what had happened, including the death of the prophets, she became enraged. In her fury she sent this message to Elijah: *"May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."* Elijah was afraid and ran for his life, becoming so depressed that he wanted to give up his work and prayed that he might die. After more than forty days, during which the Lord showed him mercy and grace, he ended up sitting alone in a cave.

In that place the Lord asked, *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"* He replied, *"I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."* His answer is so instructive, for it shows what can happen if we forget that we are part of a team. True, he may have been the only one standing up for the Lord on Mount Carmel, at least until the people saw God's miracle and repented, but what about Obadiah and the 100 prophets he protected? We can be glad that God, who knows our weaknesses, was not finished with his despairing servant. He assigned him to anoint two kings and Elisha, the man who would become his companion and eventually succeed him as prophet.

And then God added what seems to me to be almost a post script (or was it a gentle chiding?):

*“Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”* All those people were also members of God’s team, though the parts they were assigned to play were not as public as Elijah’s. How important it is for God’s “behind the pulpit” servants (prophets, teachers, evangelists) to know that the Lord knows who belongs to him! Of one thing we can be sure: at any given time, we are never the only ones giving loyal service to our God. Let’s be filled with team spirit, cheering each other on, building each other up. And why shouldn’t we? After all, no matter how it may seem at the moment, our team is ahead and marching on to certain victory! Go, team!

So far I have been talking about teamwork in the horizontal sense: being aware of God’s people in our time, both in our general location and worldwide. “Time” is the key word here, for we live and work one day at a time on earth, bound by clocks, calendars and geography. But for God’s faith family, the marvelous concept of teamwork on a vertical sense also comes into play. God’s people already have eternal life and they remain alive after they leave this earth. Really, then, we are part of a team that includes all the believers who have ever lived!

Recently I have been enjoying a new visualization of this vertical aspect of God’s team. Picture the years piling up into a column with Adam and Eve’s lifetime being on the bottom. The column is transparent enough that we can recognize some of the team members as the years climb upward. There’s Noah, then Abraham and Sarah, and then Moses - and all of them alive! Continuing to gaze upward, we see Elijah and high up on top, there’s Jesus! Now picture God putting his hand on top of the column and gently compressing it until everybody is at ground level, all contemporary. Doesn’t it make perfect sense, then, to find Moses, Elijah and Jesus working together at the transfiguration?

Now picture the years piling up again from the time of Jesus. There are the apostles, including Paul, the early church founders and martyrs, Martin Luther, Sammy Morris, my great-grandfather, Amy Carmichael and so many more, all vibrantly alive. The farther up we look, the more people we recognize, for we are getting close to our time. And now God collapses that column, too, and we are standing shoulder to shoulder with all of them. To me, this gives new meaning to Hebrews 12:1:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*

The writer of Hebrews had just finished extolling the faith of people who had lived long before their time, calling them witnesses from whom the readers could take courage. What a picture of God’s eternal team! Those who have finished their race on earth line the roads to cheer on those of us still running, while we draw strength from them, following their example. This is God’s plan to keep his team interconnected. Having the apostle Paul as my mentor and John the Baptist as one of my role models seems normal to me. They are alive, and I still have much to learn from them and from other stellar players, such as Elijah.

There is one big contrast given in the Bible between Elijah and John. We are told that John performed no miracles, while Elijah was involved in many. Once he even brought a dead boy back to life. This brings me to my final point in this section: What did Jesus mean when he said that among those born of women there had not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist? Does God compare and rank his prophets? Was he saying John was greater than Elijah, for example? I don’t think so. I believe Jesus was talking about the special assignment John had of being the prophet who was privileged to point directly at JESUS and say, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

\* \* \* \* \*

I want to conclude this essay by exploring the connection between John and Jesus, which actually

began before they were born. When Elizabeth was six months pregnant with John, the angel Gabriel told Mary that she, a virgin, would bear a son from God. Gabriel also gave Mary the news about her relative Elizabeth. Luke continues the story:

*At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:39-44).*

Elizabeth had certainly felt her baby move before; this must have been quite a special leap! That was the first time John and Jesus were together, both in their mothers' wombs. Did they ever see each other as boys, youths, young men? We can only speculate. My guess, based on the above story and the fact that Joseph's family traveled to Jerusalem in Judea at least once a year, is that they did visit from time to time. And then John moved out into the desert to be trained by God for his ministry. I don't know long John was in "God's seminary." Years may have passed between the last visit the two men had and their meeting in the Jordan River.

How well John and Jesus worked together in the time their public ministries overlapped! There wasn't a shred of competition between them. Both knew exactly who they were and what they were to do, both following the instructions of God their Father. Their disciples were aware of each other. An incident at the beginning of Luke 11 is one example that makes me think so: *One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."* That's when Jesus taught them what we commonly call "The Lord's Prayer."

Though their lifestyles were different, both were criticized. Jesus said in Matthew 11:16-19: *To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."* Both kept on working in spite of the criticism.

I find the reaction that Jesus had to John's death to be very, very touching. The story is told so well in Matthew 14. Finally Herodias was handed the opportunity she had been waiting for: a chance to have her critic put to death. Herod made a rash promise at a party to give the daughter of Herodias anything she wanted. Following her mother's instructions, she asked for the head of John the Baptist. Herod was distressed, but you can't break a promise -- can you? Besides, what would the guests think if he changed his mind? And so John was soon in Heaven, his severed head on a platter. John's disciples took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

When Jesus heard the news, "he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place." He needed to be alone, but he was not to get his wish. Word spread that Jesus had left, prompting people to hurry around the lake to meet him. When Jesus landed, he was greeted by a huge crowd! He looked at them and saw thousands of individuals, some of them sick, all wanting to be with him. Compassion for them so filled Jesus that he laid aside his own need and began to heal the sick. In the evening he fed everyone with the five loaves of bread and two fish that a boy had brought with him. After the disciples had thoroughly cleaned the picnic area, Jesus immediately made them get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side. Jesus then dismissed the crowd. When he was finally alone, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.

We are not told why Jesus wanted to be alone or what he did on the mountain besides pray, but it is not hard to guess. Drawing from the stories of Jesus with the mourners after Lazarus died and in the garden of Gethsemane, I think he grieved and wept. Jesus had feelings just as we do. I can

imagine him crying because his dear friend and partner in the work of the Kingdom was now dead and he would miss him. But more, he may have grieved over the whole human condition which includes death for everyone. And how sad to see the depths of depravity to which human beings can descend, so deep as to find pleasure in the brutal death of a good man like John! Some day his own life would be brutally cut short as well, and his disciples would be left with a body to bury and grief to bear while others would rejoice. There was much to cause heaviness in his heart and mind that night.

Now that his forerunner was gone, I think Jesus was also more aware than ever that his turn was next, and he had to talk with his Father about that, just as he did later in Gethsemane. In both instances Jesus remained alone with his Father as long as he needed to, and when he left the places of prayer, he was completely calm, ready to proceed with the business at hand. This time he saw that the disciples were having trouble on the lake. A strong wind was blowing, causing waves that were really battering the boat. Jesus stepped onto the lake and walked over to the boat, terrifying the disciples! After convincing them that it was really he and not a ghost, Jesus got into the boat, the wind died down and all was well.

\* \* \* \* \*

If John the Baptist were able to give us advice about how to live our lives, I think he would say to us – no matter what our age, “Prepare the way for the Lord! There is no finer occupation than preparing the way for the Lord.” I agree. Do you?

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