

Messiah

John 1:29-42

Do you remember the old Sesame Street game that had four squares and a jingle that went something like, "Which one of these is not like the other, which one just doesn't belong"? If you played that game with the four Gospels, John's Gospel would certainly be the one with the lights blinking around it at the end. John records no birth story, no parables and identifies Jesus' miracles as "signs." He relates not simply *what* Jesus did or taught, but also *why* or *for what reason* he did such things. When compared to the other Gospels, John paints a more divine portrait of Jesus, reminding us that this earthly Jesus is God's Son who existed before all time.

Another distinctive feature of John is the greater depth of insight concerning certain individuals in the various stories. Here, at the time of Jesus' baptism, we do not hear Jesus speak, as in Matthew, nor do we get the fuller set of details related in Mark or Luke. Instead, the evangelist records a first-person reflection by John the Baptist concerning Jesus' baptism. In the end, John the Baptist's words serve as a record of the event, but even more as a testimony concerning its significance. Here John signifies Jesus' baptism as a testimony of his true identity, not just as the earthly Christ but also as the very Son of God, the Messiah. Our scripture is located in the middle of a 4 day period.

- —Day one: The priests, Levites, and also Pharisees came out (from Jerusalem) to question John about his identity (was he the Messiah? Elijah? a prophet?) and his baptizing activity (vv. 19-28).
- —Day two: John recognized Jesus as the one who had come out to be baptized and received the Spirit from heaven; John recognized Jesus' superiority to

himself and announces Jesus as "the Son of God" and "the Lamb of God" (vv. 29-34).

- —Day three: John, standing with two of his disciples, saw Jesus and proclaimed him again as "the Lamb of God." John's two disciples accepted Jesus' call to follow him, and Simon also became a follower (vv. 35-42).
- —Day four: Jesus went with these new disciples to Galilee, recruited Philip and Nathanael, and taught them that they would see and experience even "greater things" (vv. 43-51).

John the evangelist communicates several very important points about Jesus' identity: (1) "Jerusalem" was aware of John's activity in the wilderness, and there was bewilderment about his identity; (2) John was not the Messiah; (3) the Messiah will come later, and he will be the Son of God; and (4) when the Son of God comes, John's disciples are to follow John no more.

Our scripture covers the middle two days. In the first day of our reading, John the Baptist's testimony included a declaration of Jesus as "the Lamb of God" (1:29). The image of a "lamb" often communicates a weak, vulnerable animal ready for sacrifice or slaughter. However, as it is used here and in some other Jewish writings, the lamb is powerful. The lamb reigns in the heavens and will bring about judgment on the wicked and secure salvation for the righteous.

It was in relation to this lamb that John recognized his own inferiority or lower rank. Jesus "ranks ahead" (v. 30) of John because Jesus precedes him in time (i.e., Jesus preexisted, vv. 1-5), because Jesus baptizes with the Spirit and John only with water, and because in God's plans John is introductory in function (see Isa. 40:3 in John 1:23). However, John's testimony is not diminished by this. Although "no one has ever seen God," John saw the Son of God. Therefore John had seen God because God had allowed it by showing him the Son, and then John voiced the testimony—

that Jesus is the Son of God—even before Jesus demonstrated this in his earthly ministry.

The events of the subsequent day (i.e., day three) communicate the relative positioning of John and Jesus already testified to by John. Jesus' superior rank and priority meant that any disciples of John, if they rightly understood his testimony, must move their allegiance to Jesus. John's exclamation that Jesus was the Lamb of God was one that called his disciples to detach from him and follow Jesus. Then Jesus' question, "What are you looking for?" (1:38), served as both an invitation and examination for those same disciples to follow him. As with all persons who would be followers of Jesus, it is not simply *if* they wish to follow, but *what* and *whom* are they looking for? These two disciples, one of whom is Andrew and one of whom is unnamed, not only followed but "remained" (v. 39) with Jesus that day.

It can be safely assumed that since it was already the tenth hour, or four o'clock in the afternoon, the disciples had plenty of time to converse with and learn from Jesus that day, and they might even have remained with him overnight. Although we are not privy to what was discussed during that time, we see the effects: Andrew brings his brother Simon. Simon's name is changed to Cephas or Peter, which means rock.

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Our scripture tells us about the beginning of Jesus' ministry. But this testimony is presented alongside human stories of encounter, discipleship, and relationship. Two things stand out as we examine this scripture: the true identity of Jesus and our call to follow the example of John the Baptist as witnesses of Jesus.

We learn from the very opening words of John's Gospel that Jesus is the Son of God, but this passage gives us the radical notion of the Lamb of God. Jack Miles, who has explored the "lives" of God and Jesus as narratives, has written that the startling image of the Messiah as lamb radically rejects earlier biblical images of

royal majesty, and that in choosing this metaphor, God, through Jesus, chose weakness and elected to play the role not of the All-Powerful Passover Deliverer but of the sacrificial Passover Lamb. Jesus had been baptized 40 days earlier and had gone into the wilderness to fast and pray. Now 40 days later, John the Baptist sees Jesus again and recognizes him as the one that God will use to bring salvation, wholeness, to humans. John understood that Jesus has come to take away the sins of the world! John understood that Jesus came to live a spotless and obedient life and would be the one that could and would take away the sins of the world.

John's Gospel also tells us that John pointed his disciples toward the true Lamb of God. John had lived a life of seeking and preaching of calling people, the rich, the poor, the powerful, the powerless, the titled and the untitled to prepare their lives to have a relationship with the Messiah when he revealed himself. And now that he has seen him, now that he recognizes Jesus for who he really is, John points his disciples in Jesus direction. John is our example of what it is to be a witness and evangelist for Christ. Tell what you know and point them toward Jesus, the Messiah. **Greg Garrett**

Several years ago, when the What Would Jesus Do? campaign was at its peak of popularity among young people, one commentator had a conversation with a young high schooler. She had been given a WWJD bracelet; while she was wearing it, she was also troubled by it. After youth group one night, she shared that she was struggling with the concept of the bracelet. He tried to explain that the bracelet was supposed to be a tangible reminder that we are followers of Jesus and that we are to be guided by his actions in every facet of our lives. She assured him that she understood all that. Her problem was that she did not see how it was possible for us even to know what Jesus would actually do in any situation, let alone to do it faithfully. When he tried to explain that we have the Bible and the wider community

of believers to help us, she explained in an exasperated tone, "Yeah, but don't you see? I am not Jesus! I am fully human, but I am not fully divine. I just don't think it's fair to even assume that I could imagine what Jesus would do because I am not God!" She had a point. What she was saying was that she was a representative of Jesus; however, she understood she was not Christ to the world.

A couple of years ago, this same commentator said a good friend and colleague was concerned about the commentator's schedule and commitments and hectic pace, as he was looking tired. She insisted on taking him out to lunch and said it was urgent. When they sat down at the table, the commentator asked what was going on. She told him she had some good news for him. Perplexed, he asked her what the good news was. She smiled and said, "I want you to know the Messiah has come!" Now he was thoroughly confused, so she told him she had even better news for him: "You are not him!" The real danger in a understanding of who Christ is in the world is that we come to believe that if we truly are Christ's body in the world, then if the world is going to be saved, we have to do it.

It may be better for us to ask, not so much WWJD? but rather WWJBD? What would John the Baptist do? We need to be more like John the Baptist—to call attention to Jesus Christ and then to say to all who are within hearing distance, "Hey, look! See! God is alive. God is in our midst. The Holy Spirit is at work in us and through and for us and even in spite of us! Behold! The Lamb of God!" **Rodger Y. Nishioka** May our transformation, as we walk with the Messiah, form us into new creations in Christ and form us into witnesses, so we will be like John, testifying to the whole world that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (v. 29). **Troy A. Miller**

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