

Children of the Spirit

January 12, 2025

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Jesus made a pretty good journey to see and hear John the Baptist.

According to Google Maps, that's about a 95 mile journey. They estimate it would take 35 hours to walk that distance. Jesus probably spent four days on the road. I would guess he was hot, dusty, and pretty uncomfortable when he arrived.

But he had to see John.

As I remarked during Advent, John the Baptist was a celebrity at the time. He was a rock star. He'd... made a splash.

Sorry about that one.

The point is that people came to see him. Some were probably the celebrity seekers who have to get close to the Big Name. John the Baptist, Governor Pilate, it didn't matter. Go and see. Some were certainly the suspicious religious authorities, the people who get perturbed when unauthorized people start saying religious things. Remember that John promised forgiveness with baptism, and forgiveness was something that happened when you made sacrifices in the Temple. I'm pretty sure there were priests saying, "That's not right." So they were there.

Some were the folks who desperately wanted some sense of God's forgiveness, who were aware they'd said and done things they shouldn't. Some probably wanted to turn their lives around. Some probably intended to go and do the same things again. People are people, after all.

Quite a few, I imagine, felt a gap in their spirits and didn't know why. Quite a few weren't satisfied with life in their land. Quite a few felt the need for a big change. Maybe this John the Baptist would bring it. Could he be the Messiah?

It was a crowd full of people asking very different questions.

Among them stood Jesus. We don't know what questions rolled around in his head. I think we know he felt the need for a change, because he went down to be baptized, and changed his life.

Dan Clendenin writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, “Jesus's baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with what Mark describes as ‘the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem.’ He allied himself with the faults and failures, the pains and the problems, and with all the broken and hurting people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us and among us. Not long into his public mission, the sanctimonious religious leaders derided Jesus as a ‘friend of gluttons and sinners.’ They were right about that.”

Jesus’ baptism was marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit. All four of the Gospel writers described the Spirit descending “like a dove.” All four identified this moment as the beginning of Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry. All four mentioned the similarities between Jesus’ message and John’s. Not one said that Jesus ever baptized with water.

Jesus, after all, would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Thought of as a dove, the Holy Spirit is a comforting presence, don’t you think? Doves make soft sounds. They don’t scream like mynas. They don’t fuss like finches. I agree that they don’t sing as sweetly as mejiro, but their gentle coo comforts.

The Holy Spirit means that we followers of Jesus are never alone. We don’t face the sorrows and struggles of the world unaccompanied. We don’t deal with sadness alone. We don’t bring our strength alone.

Is that different from anyone else? Honestly, I believe that God accompanies everyone, of every faith, and of no faith. Hopefully, we’ve been given a better understanding, and better understanding does mean that we should be better able to appreciate the Spirit’s presence, to rest upon the Spirit’s comfort, and to receive the Spirit’s support. I’m pretty sure that we Christians are as capable of closing ourselves off to the Spirit as any non-believer. I’m also pretty sure that when we open our hearts to the Spirit, we are filled to overflowing.

As Dan Clendenin continues, “Many malignant forces try to name and claim us. Baptism reminds us that first and foremost, above and beyond all other claims — however legitimate or oppressive — we belong to God. He knows and calls us by name.

“We don't belong to our boss or the bank. We don't belong to an abusive spouse or our addictive impulses. We're not defined by sickness, success or failure. We don't belong to the political propagandists or the advertising industry. We're not the sum total of our poor choices, painful memories, or bad dreams.”

We are none of those things. We are children of the Spirit.

Around 850 years ago the abbess Hildegard of Bingen wrote:

O comforting fire of Spirit,

Life, within the very Life of all Creation.
Holy you are in giving life to All.

Holy you are in anointing
those who are not whole;
Holy you are in cleansing
a festering wound.

O sacred breath,
O fire of love,
O sweetest taste in my breast
which fills my heart
with a fine aroma of virtues.

O most pure fountain
through whom it is known
that God has united strangers
and inquired after the lost.

The Holy Spirit didn't let either John the Baptist or Jesus alone. They were always accompanied by the Spirit – but they were also moved, led, driven by the Spirit. After his baptism, Luke wrote, Jesus “was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.” John the Baptist, as we know, didn't preach in the towns. He baptized at the edge of the river, away from the cities and the villages. The Holy Spirit cares for us, but not necessarily for our comfort.

And... I should also mention the gap that our lectionary editors have left us in Luke's account. You may have noticed that we jumped over verses 18, 19, and 20. Here's what they say:

“And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

“But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.”

It was an odd place to put that part of the story. For one thing, you could read it that John had been arrested before baptizing Jesus, which doesn't match any other gospel account. I don't think that's what Luke had in mind. Instead, I think Luke meant to highlight the risks of following the call of the Holy Spirit.

As Karoline Lewis writes at Working Preacher, “The imprisonment of John reminds us of what happens to those who tell the truth, or, to those whose words we don't want to hear. This will certainly be the case for Jesus. Hearing Jesus' first sermon, the hometown folks want to throw

him off a cliff. Jesus will be rejected by his friends, his family, his community before he even does anything.”

The Holy Spirit may lead us into places we do not want to be.

That might be into a public space, calling for change in the way we assist those without homes. It might be into a family conflict, where nobody really wants to listen to a peacemaker. It might be into advocating at work for people who will be affected by some action of the company but whose voices have not been welcomed. It might be to learn a new skill, one that doesn't come easily, to make a home a little brighter.

It might be to take on a new message and purpose in life.

Melissa Bane Sevier writes in her blog, “Purpose is something that unfolds over time. It is rarely something we can fully grasp at any one moment, because we never know what new episode is around the next corner, outside our current vision. What new opportunity, or new problem or challenge, may present itself tomorrow? In our rapidly changing world, it's rare that many of us will stay in one job for our entire working life, or live in one place, as many of our parents or grandparents did. How do we find our purpose when we have less rootedness?”

Jesus took over a month in the wilderness to discern his new purpose. None of us will find it in a moment.

We are Children of the Spirit. We are created by God and we are adopted by God. We are strengthened and comforted by God. We are led by God.

Jesus joined us in baptism by water. Jesus also joined us in baptism by the Spirit. May we follow the Spirit as faithfully as Jesus did, as the Spirit leads us in our own unique and blessed journeys.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson