

Go Tell John

Text: Matthew 11:1-6

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I have to confess that I feel like I've been at a banquet table all week. So much passion and wisdom and brilliance and courage! So many creative insights, so many parables of bold efforts, sometimes undertaken at great risk; but also the multitude of ordinary acts of generosity and mercy that repair the world. Learning how to love enemies is at the heart of our evangelical calling. But figuring out how to do that is never simple, often risky. As Clarence Jordan, one of my heroes in the faith, once said, "The Holy Spirit doesn't roost on a person who's scared to get hurt."

I also need to confess that I'm intimidated standing here. Quite a few people in this room are people I adore and look up to. It is our mutual adoration of God, our joint commitment to follow Jesus, and our common intercession in the Holy Spirit that draws us all together. Grace is indeed sufficient.

The reason we are here is not to raise up prophets. The prophets are already in place. Each one of you in this room represent tens of thousands of others who are not here, scattered across the globe, sometimes in the most unlikely places; sometimes in places whose names are hard to pronounce and whose suffering rarely appears in the news. You are among those who have not forgotten the ancient stories of redemption and promises of deliverance, stories made new by the power of the Spirit even in our day, stories that speak of a new and different future, of the coming new heaven and new earth.

But prophets get tired. Disciples get weary. Followers of the Way are tempted to sing the song of resignation: “O Lord, I’ve made you a place in my heart, and I hope now you’ll leave it alone.”¹

Sometimes our knees grow weak and our hearts grow faint. Sometimes our vision grows dim and our resolve wavers. Sometimes we simply want Jesus to leave us alone. The prophets, like the great Elijah, get frightened by the King Ahabs and the Queen Jezebels of this age. Prophets get weary. No one listens. No one pays attention. The devil has every appearance of being in charge. Every day brings more evidence that the market is rigged, that when the rich wage war it is the poor that die, that even the cries of persistent widows fail to reach corrupt judges.

The daily news is saturated with evidence that the world’s Pharaohs and Herods are still in control, that truth is bartered to the highest bidder, that the wicked will forever prosper, that the land itself shall always be enslaved to ravage, ruin and robbery. Daily we are bombarded with fresh reminders that Naboth’s vineyard will never be secure from imperial greed; that the lame will never be permitted in Caiaphas’ temple; that we will never know the name of the tortured, raped and murdered woman in Judges 19, that her cries will never be heard. [I challenge each of you in the coming months to read aloud in your church the story of Judges 19 and have your congregation wrestle with that text.]

All of these cries carry the voice of Jesus who will not leave our hearts alone.

¹ “Oh Lord, I’ve Made You a Place in My Heart,” music and lyrics by Greg Brown, sung by Dar Williams, Richard Shindell and Lucy Kaplansky from the “Cry, Cry, Cry” album, Razor and Tie label, 1998.

Some of you know the African American spiritual, “Balm in Gilead,” with this line, “Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work’s in vain. But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.”

Oh, yes, there is a balm in Gilead, and one of the ways we enjoy it is when we gather, to learn each other’s names and hear each other’s stories. There are a lot more of us out there than anybody knows, and we need to find more ways to stay connected, to instruct and encourage each other, sometimes to argue with each other, because it’s not just the world that refuses to listen—sometimes our churches refuse to listen as well. Sometimes the very communities which baptized us—who heard our promises to renounce every Caesar’s rule in favor of the Reign of God—sometimes even they fail to understand. Sometimes the ones who lowered us ’neath that cleansing flood fail to recognize the full meaning of those baptismal vows. For that matter, most of us didn’t understand what we were saying *yes* to when we took that plunge.

You won’t be surprised when I say that not everyone in the Baptist world is happy about this gathering.

The text for this evening is a little disturbing. Being disturbed is always necessary to being delivered, just like labor comes before birth. Being confused is often the first step toward being converted. I hate to tell you this, but that little place in your heart that you made for Jesus—he’s not going to leave it alone.

In today’s reading Jesus has been teaching and healing when, suddenly, the narrative is interrupted by the arrival of two men, two disciples of John the Baptizer. You know the earlier story of how Jesus, as he began his public ministry, was baptized by John. John, who when he saw Jesus, said “Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the

world!” John, who first resisted, saying to Jesus “it is I who need to be baptized by you.” John, who said “the one who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.”

John was a great disturbance to King Herod and was now in Herod’s prison. From the lonely isolation of that dark, dank prison cell he began to question his earlier confirmation of Jesus as the Anointed One. Jesus wasn’t sticking to the plan. Something’s amiss here; something’s not quite right. Can’t you hear John talking to himself in that dungeon of doubt, “Could I have gotten it wrong?”

The story of Jesus is always disturbing. Jesus had previously warned the disciples about the inevitable conflict they would face. (Chapter 10 of Matthew has several examples.) On the face of it, these warnings seem to contradict the theme of this conference, “Live in harmony, live in peace,” taken from Romans 12. But look at the way Paul ends that chapter: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves. . .” And then, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them” (vv. 19-20). The refusal of vengeance, and the feeding of enemies, are treasonous in the eyes of every empire.

When I was in high school, I spent many Saturdays working at Cagle’s Amoco gas station. For twelve hours I worked pumping gasoline, doing oil changes and washing cars. I still have a vivid memory of coming into work early one morning. Mr. Cagle has just arrived. As we busied ourselves getting ready, a news report came on the radio, with a story about Martin Luther King Jr. I don’t recall any details. Some conflict of one kind or another.

Then Mr. Cagle muttered his disgust, loud enough for me to hear. “That Martin Luther King, he ain’t no Christian. Everywhere he goes he causes trouble.” It would be

many years before it occurred to me that you could say the same thing about Jesus.

Peacemaking can get you into trouble.

I recall my first trip to South Africa, during the apartheid regime. I was stunned to find out that the word “reconciliation” was a bad word. *Not* for the white minority rulers, but for those seeking change. What I finally realized is that in that context “reconciliation” had come to mean “Once you get reconciled to the fact that we’re on top, and you’re on the bottom, then we’ll have peace.”

Or at least we’ll have quiet. Unfortunately, not everything that’s quiet is peaceful. During the 1980s one Latin American military dictator was asked by a reporter if he was willing to offer peace terms to the insurgent leaders in his country. “Yes,” he said with a laugh, “we will offer them peace. We will offer them the peace of the sepulcher”—the peace of the graveyard.

The early Christian community here in Rome was not persecuted because they confessed Jesus as Lord. The Roman Empire was actually very enlightened in some ways. They offered freedom of religion to the many peoples they conquered. The reason Christians were persecuted was that when they said “Jesus is Lord” they meant Caesar is *not* Lord. And that makes a world of difference. Neither Rome’s empire, not America’s empire, minds if you create a little place in your heart for Jesus. Rome doesn’t mind your religious decorations, just as long as it doesn’t conflict with economic policies and military planning.

There is a fierce ideological struggle going on the Gospel accounts of Jesus birth. It comes through with Mary’s song of praise, which prophesies that God has “shattered the

proud” and “put down the mighty,” “filled the hungry with good things, and the sent the rich away empty-handed” (Luke 1:51-53).

We sometimes forget the backdrop to the nativity story, particularly of the great Caesar Augustus who ruled the known world. Many inscriptions describing Caesar’s divine status can still be found. There you can read about the “gospel”—literally, *euaggelia*, the same root word in Greek we Christians use when we speak of evangelism. In Rome’s imperial world, “gospel” was the good news of Caesar’s having established “peace and security for the world.” Before Jesus, Caesar was described as “savior” who brought “salvation” to the world. Because of this, citizens were to have “faith” in their “lord” —the words “faith” and “Lord” are the same ones in the Jesus story. Elsewhere Caesar is referred to as “redeemer” who has “saved the world” from war and established “peace on the earth.”²

Do you see where this is going? Can you feel the sharp relief of those nativity stories rising from the ornamental rendering we give them each Christmas?

The birth narratives are more than sweet lullabies. These are incendiary stories. They are bold contradictions to Roman imperial authority. No wonder Herod was troubled when the magi told him of the birth of a new king!

One of my favorite quotes is from the American novelist Flannery O’Connor, when she paraphrased a line from John’s Gospel: “You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you *odd*.” The *peace* we are promised is the *Peace of Christ—Pax Christi*, and it is

² See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003, pp. 133-134 Press. And also John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*. HarperCollins Pub.: New York, 2007, pp. 28, 108, 117, 148, 204.

forever at odds with the *peace of Rome—Pax Romana*. Or, for that matter, of *Pax Americana*.

There is something real at stake in the struggle for faith. In the words of one of our Baptist saints in the U.S., “Faith is not belief in spite of the evidence. Faith is life lived in scorn of the consequences.” Theology doesn’t just go through the head. First, it makes blisters on your feet and calluses on your hands.

Years ago our family went camping with some friends in the Ozark Mountains. One of those friends, an experienced climber, brought along his ropes in case any of us wanted to try repelling. Do you know about repelling? Basically, it means dangling from a rope and walking backward down the sheer side of a mountain cliff.

The whole time I was getting strapped in my friend kept saying, “This really is very safe . . . this is very safe.” So I kept saying that to myself—*this is safe, this is safe*—until I got to the edge of the cliff, and then everything in me screamed out THIS IS NOT VERY SAFE!!!

The thing is, you can’t be absolutely certain that the rope will hold. You can check and make sure the rope is strong; you can make sure the rope is securely anchored; you can make sure the harness isn’t frayed or the metal clip isn’t cracked. After a while, though, you lean back over the edge or you don’t.

Faith—Godly reverence, the decision to follow Jesus—is like that. Reverence is not a series of intellectual affirmations, or a pattern of piety and religious practices. The indicator of reverence is risk. As followers of Jesus we are able to risk not because we are morally heroic, not because we are pure, not even because we expect to be rewarded in heaven. The reason we risk is because we are in love with God. As the angels sang to the

shepherds keeping watch over their flock, “Glory, to God; peace, to the earth” (Luke 2:14). To glorify God, seek peace for the earth.

When John sat shivering in Herod’s prison, he wondered about this promise of peace.

Had it been wishful thinking? A utopian fantasy? Childish make-believe?

Which is why he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one, or shall we look for another?”

Do you remember Jesus’ response?

Did answer in words that are now framed in the Nicene Creed? “I am the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father as only begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father. . . .”

Did he respond with the words of the Apostles’ Creed? “I am the Lord Jesus Christ, God’s only begotten Son, conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary. I will be crucified, dead, buried . . . and on the third day ascend into heaven to sit on the right hand of God. . . .”

Or maybe Jesus chose the Baptist language of the 19th century New Hampshire Confession: “I am your Mediatorial Office, who, by the appointment of the Father, have freely taken on your nature, yet without sin. . . .”

Jesus could have saved us a lot of trouble if he’d picked one of those creeds. We could have been spared a lot of hangings and drownings and burnings at the stake, not to mention inquisitions and church splits and seminary faculty firings. But he didn’t. This text is the most extensive Christological statement we have from the mouth of Jesus.

Instead of resorting to philosophical abstractions, what he said was fleshly, incarnate: Go tell John what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are

cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.

Sisters and brothers, the first thing we need to do when we get home is to go tell John—go remind the folk who baptized you—where to look for *Pax Christi*, for the peace of Christ. “Go tell John”—say that with me. (*Go tell John.*)

Go tell John, and Mary, too: The blind are being hired as wilderness travel guides. And the lame have signed up for ballroom dancing classes. *Go tell John!*

Go tell John, and Mary, too: The lepers are parading down the fashion circuit’s hottest runways in Milan and Paris. And the deaf are harmonizing over in Rome’s opera house. *Go tell John!*

Go tell John, and Mary, too: The dead have kicked off the coffin lid and put obituary writers out of business. The poor have food in the pantry and cash in their pocket. *Go tell John!*

Sisters and brothers, this is the Gospel of our Lord: The grace of God is slowly saturating our lives. Not as some kind of special religious emotion, not as some abstract creedal statement, not as some particular habits of piety. Grace is freeing us to be fearless! And because of this fearlessness we are free to revere those whom the empires revile, those whom the superpowers neglect.

Go tell John: We are free to care for those who are useless to the world’s political establishments and economic systems. Neither Rome nor Washington—can threaten us anymore; King Herod’s regime cannot take anything from us that is essential. From this confidence we can pray as Jesus taught us: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on

earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). Because one day, according to John’s Revelation, “The kingdom of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord” (11:15).

Go tell John, and Mary, too. The grace of God is disarming our hearts and will, in time, disarm the nations. The day is coming, says the Psalmist, when we “shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” (27:13). *Go tell John.*

Go tell John, and Mary, too that the mark of Heaven’s vision is when wolf and lamb lie together (Isa. 11:6), when justice rolls down like waters, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). On that day shame will be turned to praise (Zeph. 3:19), the poor will be lifted from the ash heap (1 Sam. 2:8), and immigrants will be welcomed (Mal. 3:5). *Go tell John.*

Go tell John, and Mary, too, that one day slaves will be released, debts will be canceled, ancestral lands will be returned (Lev. 25) and all shall sit, unafraid, ’neath their vine and fig tree (Micah 4:4) One day, Paul says in Romans, creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay (8:22). Tears will be dried (Rev. 21:4). The bows of the mighty will be broken (1 Sam. 2:4). Swords will be beaten into plowshares (Micah 4:3). *Go tell John.*

Go tell John, and Mary, too, that on that glorious day of disarmament, on that day when justice and peace will embrace (Ps. 85:10), we shall all meet again on the banks of that great river; and there we will lay down our swords and shields: *Down by the riverside, down by the riverside. I’m gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside, down by the riverside. . . .*

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