

The Young and the Restless
Sermon on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, January 14, 2007

“The Young and the Restless” may not be television’s longest-running soap opera, but the ongoing feud between the characters Katherine Chancellor and Jill Foster Abbott sets a record as daytime TV’s longest-running rivalry. For nearly 27 years, Katherine and Jill have been constantly sabotaging each other’s happiness. Things started out well enough: Katherine hired the younger Jill to be her personal assistant. Unfortunately, Jill fell in love with her boss’s husband, Phillip, and when Katherine discovered their affair, she responded by trying to interest Jill in her son, Brock, whom Jill married, even though she was carrying Phillip’s love child. Phillip tries to divorce Katherine in the Dominican Republic, where he is critically injured in a car accident and marries Jill on his deathbed. The rest of the story seems to involve lawsuits, stolen babies, fights over potential love interests, blackmail, and a sanitarium. So whether it’s over men, money, or the custody of a child, these two women are always in direct competition.

The relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist, unlike that between Katherine Chancellor and Jill Abott, is not competitive, although it does have certain elements of the classic soap operatic rivalry: the two men share family ties, each was born under unusual circumstances, and each seemed destined for greatness. The angel who had announced the promise of John the Baptist said that “many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord” (Lk. 1:14-15). When John was born, his father declared, “[Y]ou, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins” (1:76-77).

“Great in the sight of the Lord” and “the prophet of the Most High” are nothing to sneeze at, but the same angel who had predicted great things for John predicted even greater things for

his younger cousin, Jesus. The angel told Mary that her child, Jesus, “will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (1:32-33). John’s father acknowledged that it was Jesus, not John, whom God had “raised up as a mighty savior ... in the house of his servant David” (1:69).

If the boys knew anything of their future greatness, they betrayed no hint of it growing up. Of the young John the Baptist, Luke says only, “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel” (1:80). And with the notable exception of the scene in which the twelve-year-old Jesus remains in the Jerusalem Temple to talk theology with the religious teachers, Jesus has a similarly unremarkable adolescence and young adulthood. He remained in Nazareth where he was “obedient” to his parents, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (2:52).

The next thing we hear of John is in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, sometime around 30 A.D. John was traveling throughout the region around the Jordan River, preaching up a storm. He was a young firebrand, fresh out of the Divinity School of the Desert, where he had had plenty of time to spend with God. And the message that God had been preparing him to bring was “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (3:3). Like many a young and restless preacher in a new appointment, John sought to change things. By and large, Jews didn’t baptize people. Certainly they knew what baptism was: the really religious among them baptized pots and pans, cups and kettles, and just about any other utensil that might be ritually unclean. “To baptize,” after all, means simply to dip, immerse, or wash in water.

John wasn’t baptizing the cookware and the cutlery, however. He was baptizing people, washing them from their sins. Some were the petty crimes and small-scale injustices found in

every community's police blotter. Some were the notorious sins publicized on the evening news. Others were the quiet sins known only in the darkness of individual hearts. "Repent," said John. "Turn away from the sins that defile you and turn your lives toward God. Do those things that please God, not yourselves. And don't put off making that life-change any longer because the judgment of God is at hand."

Legend has it that the 18th-century evangelical preacher George Whitefield was so good and so dramatic that he could make women weep merely by the way he said the word, "Mesopotamia." Well, John the Baptist probably made people cry, but it wasn't on account of his pronunciation. He ranted and raved. He called his audience a bunch of snakes. He exhorted them to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (3:8). He challenged their lame excuses. He threatened them with hellfire and brimstone. He called them to be prepared for God's coming.

And he got results, converting the good, the bad, and the ugly: The crowds of people who came out to hear him preach and to be baptized by him asked him, "What should we do?" John answered them, "Whoever has two coats must share with those who have none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (3:11). When the despised tax collectors came to be baptized and asked what they should do, John said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you" (3:13). When even hired soldiers came down to get baptized and asked what they should do, John told them not to extort money from their countrymen by threats or false accusations.

Cheats, frauds, and mercenaries—the worst of the worst—were converted. John was more successful at turning lives around than Oprah and Dr. Phil combined. He was an overnight sensation, a religious phenomenon. Everyone was "filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah" (3:15). The talking heads got to talking, and the bloggers got to blogging. "Can this be the Messiah?" they

asked. “Just look at the amazing things he’s doing. People are changing their lives based on his powerful preaching.”

John heard the buzz and saw his name in lights. He was invited to all the late-night talkshows and promised a sizable advance on his book. But when he spoke to the reporters at his press conference, he told them, Sorry, fellas, but you’ve got the wrong guy. “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He 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” (3:16-17).

To what young and restless figure was John pointing? Who was this “more powerful man” to come? John was, of course, pointing to Jesus, the One whom the angel said would be called the Son of the Most High, the One who would save his people from their sins. Jesus had come with the crowds to see and hear John. And something in his cousin’s preaching moved his heart and stirred his soul. As we celebrate the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King—a man whose words moved hearts and stirred souls—one columnist has written that “King stood with, not above, the people.”¹ Maybe Dr. King learned that from Jesus. Jesus stood with the people, not above them, and he came to be baptized with them—the tax collectors and the soldiers and the unwashed masses. In Jesus, God was there “in the river with us, in the flesh with us, in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of new life with us.”²

This was all a part of God’s plan, a plan that called for John to come first to prepare the way, and for Jesus to come next to save his people from their sins. As one writer wryly notes,

¹ Rich Benjamin, “King stood with, not above, the people” in USA Today for Friday, January 12, 2007 at http://news.yahoo.com/s/usatoday/20070112/cm_usatoday/kingstoodwithnotabovethepeople.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “The River of Life” in *Home by Another Way* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1999) 35.

“John’s role as the one who prepares the way for the Messiah could not have been an easy one.”³ Though he had shown remarkable abilities as a preacher and people thought maybe he was God’s promised Messiah, John was not a young and restless seeker after worldly fame and glory. Instead, he pointed the way to another, more powerful One. Indeed, he demonstrated an incredible “ability to share the mantle of leadership and power with his cousin—to know when to step aside and let it pass to someone more worthy.”⁴ In order for the world to receive the Son, the world had to be turned back toward God. John prepared that way by calling people to repent and be baptized, and pointed forward to the Coming One.

Suddenly, without warning or fanfare, there he was in the waters of the Jordan River, standing with the people he had come to save. Here was the One mightier even than John, who, having been baptized in water, would baptize others with the Holy Spirit and fire. Already his winnowing fork was in his hand to do the work of judgment: to clear the chaff and burn it and bring the wheat into his granary. Jesus would do these things because, like his cousin and forebear, he was young and restless, passionate for truth and justice and mercy, a man after God’s own heart. Jesus, like John, saw that the world had gone astray, wandering from God’s will and ways. Thus Jesus’ message, like John’s, was one of repentance (cf. Mt. 3:2, 4:17), a call to turn toward God so as to participate in God’s saving work. The Mighty One had come as savior and judge.

Together, John and Jesus point us to God: John standing at the Jordan, pointing to Jesus; Jesus standing with us in the baptismal waters, pointing toward life with God. Each a young and fearless prophet, unafraid to speak the truth to us about who we are and our need for God, each filled with a restless passion to bring us salvation. They were young and restless to fulfill the

³ Linda Petrucelli, “The Patron Saint of Sharing” in *The Living Pulpit*, October/December 1997, p. 7 at <http://search.atlaonline.com/pls/eli/getarticle?artid=ATLA0000909447>.

⁴ Ibid.

promise of God, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isa. 43:1).