

Jesus' Help—Sought and Received or Outright Rejected

Advent 3-C, Luke 3:18-35, Dec. 13, 2015

It's always been amazing to me how many great men and women of faith in the Bible certainly seem to have more than their **fair share** of **“skeletons in their closets.”** And to have “a skeleton in your closet” **usually means** that there is something in your past that you certainly don't want others to discover, for fear that it could ruin your reputation with them! **Linguists tell us that this old expression** originally came about from the possibility of **one person having murdered another and then storing the dead body of their victim in a very private closet somewhere;** a closet that was never discovered by anyone else until many, many years later, when by this **time, all that is left of that victim is their skeleton in that closet!**

I mean, would the **Patriarch Abraham** have really wanted the whole world to know that when his name was still Abram and his wife's name Sarai that he instructed his wife to tell the people in Egypt that she was **really his sister and not his wife,** for fear that someone might have murdered him in order to take his wife unto themselves because of her **extreme beauty** (Genesis 12:16-19)?

Would the **Patriarch Jacob** really have wanted the whole world to know how he tricked **his blind father Isaac** into giving him the birthright that actually belonged to his brother **Esau**?

Would **King David** have wanted the whole world to know about the extramarital affair that he had with his **Attorney General's wife** named **Bathsheba**?

Would **Peter** have wanted the whole world to know that he denied ever having even known Christ, three different times on the eve of our Lord's crucifixion and that he did so vehemently; adding in even a few cuss words to strengthen his denials?

Would **Thomas** really have wanted the world to know how he got that ever popular nickname **“Doubting Thomas;”** a name that the Church has given to him throughout the ages **though the Bible does not?**

How about John the Baptist? In all four Gospel accounts, John the Baptist is pictured as a man of impeccable character, a man whose very birth into this world was clearly foretold by Old Testament prophecies found in the books of **Malachi and Isaiah.** John the Baptist would be God's own special messenger in **preparing** his contemporaries for the **coming of the Messiah!** He would be the **voice of that one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!” (Luke 3:4).**

Even the birth of John the Baptist was marked by special touches of God's hand to distinguish him as one chosen by God for the important role he would play. **“The angel Gabriel appeared to his father Zachariah in the temple and told him that he would have a very special son (Luke 1:17),** whose birth would no doubt also have a **miraculous dimension** connected to it, since Zachariah and Elizabeth were well beyond the age for having children.

Even as an unborn child, six months from the time of his conception, he “jumped for joy” inside of his mother Elizabeth's body, when her cousin Mary came with the news that she would be the **blessed Virgin Mother of the promised Savior.**

We really do not know how long, for sure, John the Baptist had been out there preaching his baptism of repentance on the banks of the Jordan River for the forgiveness of sins, before that ominous day arrived when he saw John saw Jesus coming towards him and the Baptist declared: **“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! This is he of whom I said ‘after me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ (John 1:29-30)!**

Matthew tells us: **“In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ And John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.**

Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:1-6).

And so what we observe in the Gospel lesson this morning would seem to be so totally out of character with respect to everything we had learned about John the Baptist up to this point! **But let me remind you that John the Baptist had been languishing in Herod’s prison for well over a year some Bible scholars calculate that he was there for close to two years,** when and where we meet him in our Gospel lesson today, after John the Baptist had boldly pronounced the illicit affair that Herod was having with Herodias, who was actually his brother Philip’s wife! St. Luke tells us: ***“And John calling two of his disciples to himself sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”***

Perhaps the very fact that John could not ask this question of Jesus personally, gives us some **understanding of the reason for the question.** John was in such **dire straits**, that it ought to at least be understandable to us, that perhaps he fell into the same trap that many of our Lord’s contemporaries did. For certainly they and John would have expected that Jesus, the Promised Messiah, would have taken public control of his kingdom by now! In such circumstances, **Ecclesiastes 8:6** tell us that ***“a man’s misery weighs heavily upon him,”*** so that it would have been easy for John to now also be plagued with some personal doubts. **John’s biggest problem may not have been that he was in jail, but that he was in jail for doing the right thing!**

But if there is one message, concerning **great men of God**, that the **Bible makes clear to us is that very godly men can have doubts about their faith too, especially when they are in the midst of very trying circumstances!** The Prophet Jeremiah certainly had his **share of personal doubts!**

And to some degree it is interesting to **contrast the prophetic ministry of Elijah with that of John the Baptist, since Malachi also predicted to us that the forerunner of Christ would eventually come among us in the power and the spirit of Elijah.** Elijah had seen God work many powerful miracles. In his duel with the prophets of Baal, Elijah **called down fire from heaven to consume his saturated sacrifice and then he took up a sword and slew all 400 of them.** Later, when the wicked son of Ahab and Jezebel sent a contingent of **50 soldiers** to take him captive, he called down fire from heaven and consumed them. When a second group of **50 came, he did the same thing again.**

But we know that shortly after this, the prophet Elijah became totally exhausted and burned out with the situation at hand. He walks a whole day’s journey out into the wilderness where he sits down under a broom tree and hands in his resignation as a prophet to God! But we remember how God sent an angel to minister to Elijah, so that Elijah could have the R&R that he so much needed and deserved, and then how an angel fed Elijah with some very special food and drink, a type of sacramental meal, so that Elijah could go forth in the strength of that food for the forty days that followed. **Aren’t there times in most people’s lives when the circumstances surrounding them in this life may become so challenging, that they begin to doubt their faith in God too?**

WELL, HOW DOES JOHN THE BAPTIST DEAL SUCCESSFULLY WITH HIS DOUBTS?

HE SENT HIS DISCIPLES STRAIGHT TO JESUS WHO QUOTED UNTO OUR LORD JOHN THE BAPTIST’S EXACT WORDS VERBATIM! “ARE YOU THE ONE WHO IS TO COME, OR SHALL WE LOOK FOR ANOTHER?” -- At the very moment when these two disciples of John the Baptist arrive at the destination where Jesus was to be found, our **“Lord was healing many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirit, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight!” (Luke 7:21).**

Brothers and sisters, our Lord Jesus had a message for John, and let's not fail to notice the gentleness that was there in Jesus' answer. Jesus does not chastise John for asking him this question. Rather, Jesus gives John the encouragement he needs, by citing Old Testament prophecies like **Isaiah 35:5-6**, and **Isaiah 61:1**. Since Jesus was **actually performing miracles** on people in the presence of John's disciples when they arrived on the scene, our Lord says: ***"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear. The dead are raised up! The poor have good news preached to them and blessed is the one who is not offended by me!"*** Jesus' answer is that he is fulfilling the promises concerning the Messiah. Our Savior's answer by his miracles is: ***"Yes, I am the One who was to come! I am the Messiah!"***

And can't we still have **our own special brands of modern-day doubts too?** We too may ask questions, such as: **(1) If there really is a God alive in this world then why do wars not cease? (2) Others ask: "Why do innocent children suffer?" Or "Why doesn't God intervene against evil?" (3) Thirdly, others may have yet different expectations about Jesus! "Since I am following Jesus, why doesn't he heal my cancer?" (4) Or fourthly: "Why don't I have more money?" (5) Or fifthly: "Since I am a follower of Jesus, shouldn't I be able to expect much more of a 'problem-free' life?**

And yet the fact that there are wars raging in this world, the Bible teaches us, is not the result of God's doing but our own. In **James 4:1-4** we read: ***"What causes wars and fights among you? Is it not that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions! You adulterous people—do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy with God!"***

Once Jesus sends his messengers back to John, Jesus then begins to exonerate John the Baptist to the crowd of people no doubt standing around him! ***"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind or a man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. When then did you go out to see, a prophet? Yes, I tell you and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you: Among those born of women no one is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he!"*** Here Jesus is reminding us that while **John the Baptist was the last in a long line of Old Testament prophets, and that God's Word came out of his mouth,** and that he was richly blessed in actually living long enough to see the Messiah appear before him with his very own eyes, that **HE DID NOT LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO SEE THE MESSIAH'S MISSION COMPLETED HERE ON EARTH.** Just as **Moses** stood on the mountain and saw the Promised Land, but never entered it or experienced the Promised Land, so too **John the Baptist** looked into the future and saw the kingdom of heaven quickly coming among us, but never really experienced it before his death on this earth either!

Jesus is reminding us that even the newest, weakest Christian is greater than John the Baptist because you and I, by the grace of God through faith, have now experienced the finished work of Christ for ourselves! We know firsthand those things that John only dreamed of. We know **the power of repentance and sins forgiven!** We know about **Christ's reconciling death upon the cross and the empty tomb!** We know that the **grave could not hold our Savior.** We know how forty days after his **glorious resurrection from the dead, that first Easter morning, that He ascended to the right hand of the Father** and that he is now interceding for us there, and for all the saints! These are things that John didn't know. John saw only the beginning, but we by the grace of God through faith, have come to see the complete story of our redemption!

The same thing could now be said of John the Baptist that is said about so many of God's faithful people who lived courageously and valiantly for him in Hebrews 11, *"These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country; that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be call their God, for he has prepared for them a city"* (Hebrews 11:13-16).

In this Gospel lesson this morning we can see two totally different responses given to Jesus and his Word. Response Number One: **The people heard the message of John and Jesus and declared that God was just and correct in his verdict. They were guilty of sin and needed to repent** and that this is exactly what they did. In verse 29, Jesus himself reminds us: ***"When all the people heard this and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John!"***

But there is also Response Number Two in the second half of verse 29 for Jesus continues: ***"But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves not having been baptized by John!"*** These men in "running down" both John the Baptist and Jesus were trying to demonstrate their own superiority over both of them.

They disagreed with God's verdict and in the end suffered the consequences. **So in the end, Jesus shows that there are two types of people, those who agree with God concerning their sin and those who are offended when they are told that they are sinners!** And secondly Jesus is reminding us that even the greatest prophet can become assailed with doubts from time to time when faced with serious trials and tribulations! When we come to him, as we are all invited to do so again today, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ restores us—those his word of judgment remains intact against all those who refuse to repent of their sins and continue only to harden their hearts against the LORD God and his Word!

The last two sermons that I have preached from this pulpit, I concluded my sermon by sharing with you one of Jesus' parables. And today I want to do the same thing by directing your attention to the closing words of our Gospel lesson that are actually a parable of Jesus also because a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. And I'd like to entitle this parable of Jesus as: **"THE PARABLE OF THE BRATS!"** And you know what a "brat" is, don't you? According to the **Merriam Webster** dictionary, a **"brat"** is an especially annoying, ill-mannered child, thought to be spoiled and very mischievous in their behavior.

A brat is a child whom you can never satisfy no matter what you do. So listen with me once more to Jesus' **"Parable of the Brats"** if you will: *"To what shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you and you did not dance! We sang a dirge and you did not weep!" For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say: "He has a demon!" The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say: "Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"*

Then quoting Proverbs 9 from the Old Testament, Jesus goes on to say: *“Yet wisdom is justified by all her children!”*

Do you believe John the Baptist would be upset if he knew we were pulling that skeleton out of his closet about his own time of personal doubting today?

I can't say for sure, but I don't believe he would be! I think he would **assume much more the attitude of the Apostle Paul who gladly told others about the great misconceptions he had had for years**. And you remember how Paul goes on to say in effect, “If God can forgive me my sins, then God can forgive anybody, and forgive you your sins too” (I Timothy 1:15-16)

And how about you and me, do we sometimes grow overly concerned about any skeletons that we might have hanging out in our closets? Well, if we do, there is no better antidote for this unfortunate dilemma than for us to personally heed the words of St. Paul's own directive in our Epistle Lesson today: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice! Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:4-7)!*

How about you and me, dear friends? When we go through our own times of testing in our own lives of faith? At such times, will we seek out Jesus' help and receive it, or will we like the Pharisees and the scribes and simply outright reject it. “Jesus Help—Sought and Received or Outright Rejected.” This is the title of my sermon today! Amen