



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

St. John the Forerunner

-Rev. Thom Muller

*A sermon delivered at Hillside Swedenborgian Church in El Cerrito, California
on June 2, 2017*



July 2017

Readings

John 1: 19-34 (NRSV)

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said,

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’”

as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin 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.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”¹

¹ New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite:

The Divine Names (6th century), third Chapter

Even as our sun -not by calculating or choosing, but by its very being, enlightens all things able to partake of its light in their own degree- so too Goodness -as superior to a sun, as the ultimate archetype, is above an obscure image- by Its very existence sends to all things that be, the rays of Its whole being, according to their capacity.

By reason of these rays subsist all the intelligible and intelligent essences and powers and energies. By reason of these they are, and have their life, continuous and undiminished, purified from all corruption and death and matter, and generation; and separated from mutability, and are conceived of as incorporeal and immaterial, and as minds they are illuminated as to the reasons of things, in a manner peculiar to themselves; and they again convey to their kindred spirits things appropriate to them; and have their life from Goodness.²

² Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. *The Classics of Western Spirituality Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Secrets of Heaven* §4727

“We can see in the Gospels that John the Baptist prepared the way, and made a pathway for the Lord, and further, in his own words, that the Lord was one with the Father, and that the Father was in Him, and He in the Father; also that to Him was given all power in heaven and on earth, and that judgment belonged to Him. One who knows even a little about power in heaven and on earth, and about judgment, can know that they would be nothing unless He were Divine as to the Human also.

When we are in faith alone, we cannot know what makes us new or sanctifies us, still less what made the Lord's Human Divine; for in the state of faith alone, we know nothing of love and charity, and it is love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor that make us new and sanctify us, while Divine love itself made the Lord Divine. For love is our very being, and our whole life; and it forms us according to an image of itself, just as our soul, which is our interior essence, as it were, creates or fashions the body into an image, of itself; and indeed in such a way that by means of the body it acts and has sensation just as it wills and thinks. Thus the body is as the effect, and the soul as the cause in which is the end; consequently the soul is the all in the body, as the cause of the end is the all in the effect.”³

v

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Translated by John Elliott. London: Swedenborg Society., 1983.

Today, I'd like to talk about a biblical character who has always fascinated and kind of mystified me. He's this eccentric character, a desert ascetic, he wears camel hair and eats honey and locusts (which, if you ask me, sounds pretty delicious actually, but that's beside the point).

John the Baptist has generally been portrayed as the forerunner of Christ both theologically and artistically. He's out in the desert, preaching and baptizing. We're never told the specifics of his teachings, although some scholars have linked him to the Essenes, who were this mystical monastic Jewish sect of renunciates, that Jesus is also often linked to. In the gospels he's portrayed as preaching a pretty simple message of repentance and purification, preparing the way for the expected Messiah. And the different gospel stories differ in their accounts of John. And there is so much rich correspondence, and some beautiful sacred symbolism in these different narratives.

There are these three major episodes in the narrative of John the Baptist. It's his miraculous birth, his ministry in the desert, including his baptism of Christ, and his imprisonment and execution (Sound familiar?). If we were to compile the different renditions of the life of John from the Gospels, as well as the Qur'an, he is born miraculously to this couple Elizabeth and Zechariah, who is a temple priest. It was miraculous because Elizabeth was past the age of being biologically able to bear children. In several accounts, the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah, and prophesies about the miracle birth that's about to happen. The Gospel of Luke points out that Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Which would have made Jesus and John the baptist cousins of sorts.

So, there's not a lot about John's developmental years that we hear about (kind of like with Jesus) all we're told is he ends up being this kind of radical hobo-ascetic out in the desert, and he has this really kind of harsh message of repentance. He reminds me of some of the wonderful characters I have worked with on the streets at the San Francisco Night Ministry. In Luke 3 we can read one of his angry rants:

“Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as *our* father.’

For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”⁴

So he’s calling people out on their complacency. Telling themselves that their identity as “Children of Abraham” somehow is a spiritual merit in and of itself. He rebukes them in kind of a jerk-ish way, and tells them about the tree that doesn’t bear fruit being cut down, meaning religion without lived love and kindness. He then gives the practical advice to tax collectors and roman soldiers, telling them to share their possessions, and to stop extorting and oppressing the people they interact with. What would he be telling us?

And of course, he performs the rite of baptism. And baptism is this really universal ritual. It involves one of the most elemental substances, water, and usually represents initiation or transition, a spiritual cleansing, and a re-birth. Re-generation, you could say. And then there’s the famous scene where he baptises Jesus. And again, the different accounts vary from John being confused and having no clue who Jesus is at first, to him instantly acknowledging him as “The Lamb”.

Pretty quickly after this, he is detained and imprisoned by Herod, who is basically a provincial governor. And again, there’s conflicting accounts of this stuff, but supposedly John the Baptist had called out Herod for marrying his brother’s wife. And Salome, her daughter ends up hanging out at the court, and Herod is being a dirty creep and asks her to dance for him, and offers her anything she asks in return. So she dances for him and he enjoys it, and she asks her mom what to request. And she tells her to request the head of John the Baptist. And just like Pontius Pilate, Herod is reluctant, but gives in to the request.

It’s a weird story right? And as with all sacred stories, the question is what’s the point? I mean, the historicity of any of this is dubious, as is much of the Gospels and other biblical narratives,

⁴ New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

although the Jewish historian Josephus does mention the execution of John, who is called the baptist. (another parallel to Jesus here).

Obviously, it's no surprise that since we're in a Swedenborgian context, we're about to explore some of the inner, esoteric meanings of this narrative. Swedenborg argues that these sacred narratives are correspondential to spiritual dynamics that are playing out in our inner life, and on different metaphysical levels. So just like Christ represents a state of consciousness, so does John the Baptist. And the idea that there are layers upon layers of symbolism in this story is not really even controversial. It's full of these meaningful similarities to other scenarios, as we've already pointed out. Another one is that John's sayings and actions resemble those of the prophet Elijah, and it was a common belief that he was, in fact, a re-incarnation of Elijah, although he denies this in the Gospel of John. And when he is asked who he is he recites a culmination of old prophecies from scripture, and in Mark he makes clear references to the book of Exodus, and the messianic prophecies in Isaiah and Malachi.

He quotes scripture, saying:

*"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way — a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"*⁵, which is actually a combination of statements in Isaiah and Malachi. So, John the Baptist seems to have this function of preparation, of "making straight the paths" for the one who is about to come.

Now, how does this relate to our own spiritual life, our own spiritual growth? Swedenborg, in his mystical interpretation of scripture, emphasizes his role as a preparatory messenger. He represents a formative stage in the coming of the Lord. Now, we've talked a lot about the inner meaning of Christ's coming. We've talked about the notion that the virgin birth, the development, the temptations, the passion and crucifixion, and the second coming of the Christ are all correspondential to our own spiritual growth and self-realization. And the idea that both the first and second coming of Christ represent the process of collective and individual regeneration. The cataclysmic opening of consciousness and spiritual awareness.

⁵ Ibid.

But to Swedenborg, these things don't come instantly. There's this continuous narrative in his writings about these cycles of growth and development that everything goes through. From nature to human society, to our individual spiritual development. And one of the common threads in these cycles, a kind of elemental part of this design, is that foundations are laid. And this is the spiritual dynamic that John the Baptist plays. He represents a kind of pure devotion, bhakti yoga, in the eastern context. He's the patron saint of ascetics and monastics and hermits and renunciates. And he preaches this very plain and simple, kind of harsh message, with very passionate and very clear ideas of right and wrong. He has some idea of a broader, deeper, purer message, but is, in a way, limited in his understanding.

I love the way that Nikos Kazanzachis portrays John the Baptist in his novel "the last temptation of Christ", which is a fictional reimagining of the Christ narrative. He's this wild kinda crazy dude assembling this weird following, and he's really into having stuff figured out right now, and violently overthrowing the Roman empire, and Jesus has to kind of calm him down, because he's so passionate that he's not seeing straight.

And there are two concepts that Swedenborg relates to this state that John the Baptist is a reflection of. Most clearly, it is the "literal meaning of the Word", and in a more abstract way, a developing relationship with the divine which is rooted in the natural and the earthly, and in a kind of faith that is simplistic and somewhat dogmatic. John the Baptist is an image of the literal meaning of the word, which prepares the way for our understanding of its internal meaning, which, of course, is at the center of our spiritual tradition. One seems harsh and abstract and moralizing, but it is the catalyst, the messenger of spiritual principles which are full of peace and absolute goodness. The state called John the Baptist is a necessary one. And it is a cyclical dynamic. As we travel up the spiral of spiritual development, there is always a step further we can go. It's a state of growth and transition. From the old image of God represented by Zacharias, to the new image represented in Christ. From the stubborn and dogmatic state of "faith alone" of what Swedenborg calls the "old church", both collectively and individually,, to the union of faith and understanding in the New Church, represented by the image of the Second Coming of Christ.

And the imagery continues to John's death. Rather than Christ, who rises with his whole body, John the Baptist is decapitated, another common image in world mythology. This is both an image of sacrifice, or martyrdom, as well as representing the almost ironic cutting off of the natural mind, the natural understanding of things. The body is transcended, and the first thing to go are those intellectual and ideological concepts and beliefs which we had previously relied on so dearly. And it comes from an egoic and selfish indulgence in the sensual, represented by Salome and Herod. Because we realize that, after all, it was the gratification of our natural, primitive senses that we were after, an ego-driven spirituality.

Does this state seem familiar? Have you been in a state of total devotion to something? Something you really cared about, but didn't quite understand? Have you been in a state where you thought you had things figured out? When things looked black and white, and there was a straight and narrow path to follow? Have you then gone through the experience of expanding your viewpoint, realizing that your state of almost blind devotion to an idea or a lifestyle was limited and maybe even a bit superficial, but it laid the groundwork for who you are today?

I can't answer this question for you, but to me it seems, both from my own experience, and from that of others, that this is, in fact, a universal state that keeps repeating. I associate it with a kind of sincere, but dogmatic outlook. A kind of simple faith, that reminds me of the "first naive", that the philosopher Paul Ricoeur talks about in his concepts of human spiritual development. It's kind of simplistic and literalist, but it opens us up to the second naive, when the harshness of idealism and passionate devotion is confronted with the Lamb, so to speak, representing a loving-kindness that restores the balance of love and wisdom and enables us to be truly rational, in the Swedenborgian sense of the word. But if there's one thing to always keep in mind when speaking about correspondences, it's that they are not just chronological dynamics that happen once. It's a lot more like a spiral, if that makes any sense.

So, when we contemplate on the inner meaning of John the Baptist, let's not automatically look at our lives retrospectively. That's exactly the trap. I think the idea is that to some degree, we are always in the state of John the Baptist. I think of my own life. As a teenager, I was super religious, and

really into the literal sense of scripture. And I thought I had it all figured out. Then I gradually realized some of the logical and practical problems that come with a literal, kind of fundamentalist understanding of scripture and reality. And I found Swedenborg and others, who were able to look deeper, and open up a whole other realm of understanding. And a part of me figured “Yes, Score! I got it all figured out again, screw those old fundamentalists, here’s the way to go”, and then I realized some of the issues with reading Swedenborg too literally, and not taking his teachings, as progressive and holistic as they may be, too literally. And that part of the whole point of the New Church is progress, and we are much further on that collective spiritual timeline than Swedenborg was. And at each of these stages, there was this feeling of “I’ve got it figured out”. I’ve arrived. The feeling that this state of understanding or awareness or consciousness that I discovered is IT. That this John the Baptist is in fact the Messiah. And he looks a lot like him. But there is always further to go, or deeper, or higher, depending on your perspective.

There is always a part of our spiritual consciousness that is complacent, that thinks it’s seeing the light, when it’s only seeing a reflection. We can apply this to our image of the Divine. We might have the image of Christ, or another avatar, or the Buddha, or the spiritual sun. And part of us will think that “now we’ve got it all figured out”. “Now we know how things work spiritually”.

The State of John the Baptist is a state of growth and transition. If you look at the top of the page, you see this icon of John the Baptist. And you may have noticed that he has wings. And there are different reasons why in iconography he is often depicted with wings. He’s considered an angelic being, a messenger, often referred to as “the Angel of the Desert”. Someone, or something that is in movement. That acts as a mediator between higher and lower realms. He is also holding a chalice with the baby Jesus inside it, resembling Mary, about to birth the divine into the world.

I invite you to print and keep this image. Maybe put the image in a little frame, or hang it up on your fridge or in your house altar or whatever works for you. And when you see him, allow yourself to remember that he represents a part of you. A transition. And I hope that this image will remind you to both question and appreciate the state that you are in spiritually. To never be complacent or

prideful or self-righteous in your particular understanding, but to live in the acknowledgement that that you can always go deeper, and you always need to be open towards that innocence, that loving-kindness, that is represented by the lamb. And that there is an understanding, a reality, that is much greater than ourselves.

And let us bear in mind that this does not just apply to what we may label “spirituality”. How, for example does this dynamic play into contemporary issues, such as climate change and social justice, and our individual and collective approach to these, and our willingness to learn and change?

May we all be aware of our role as vessels and distributors of the divine, in its love and wisdom, manifested in Christ consciousness and the presence of his second coming within us.

Amen.