

**18** John's disciples informed him about all these things. John called two of his disciples **19** and sent them to the Lord. They were to ask him, "Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?"

**20** When they reached Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you. He asks, 'Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?'"

**21** Right then, Jesus healed many of their diseases, illnesses, and evil spirits, and he gave sight to a number of blind people. **22** Then he replied to John's disciples, "Go, report to John what you have seen and heard. *Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled now walk. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. And good news is preached to the poor.*[a] **23** Happy is anyone who doesn't stumble along the way because of me."

**24** After John's messengers were gone, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John. "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A stalk blowing in the wind? **25** What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who dress in fashionable clothes and live in luxury are in royal palaces. **26** What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. **27** He is the one of whom it's written: *Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.*[b]**28** I tell you that no greater human being has ever been born than John. Yet whoever is least in God's kingdom is greater than he." **29** Everyone who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged God's justice because they had been baptized by John. **30** But the Pharisees and legal experts rejected God's will for themselves because they hadn't been baptized by John.

**31** "To what will I compare the people of this generation?" Jesus asked. "What are they like? **32** They are like children sitting in the marketplace calling out to each other, 'We played the flute for you and you didn't dance. We sang a funeral song and you didn't cry.' **33** John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' **34** Yet the Human One[c] came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' **35** But wisdom is proved to be right by all her descendants." - Luke 7:18-35, Common English Bible

Sometimes when we focus on Jesus in the Gospels we end up totally confused. Or maybe that's just me. But seriously, friends, is today's reading easy to understand? Particularly the things that Jesus says... his wrap up lines especially... they had me scratching my head and wrestling... So I'm wondering if you might be willing to do a bit of Bible Study with me today. I'm down here on the floor because I want us to zoom in on Jesus and John in the Gospel of Luke and see what we can figure out together. So... can you pull a Bible out of the pew rack or bring up a Bible on your phone or tablet?

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Let's start with today's reading, Luke chapter 7, verses 18-35. The action gets started when John the Baptist's disciples bring him a message about everything Jesus has been doing— most notably, perhaps, the healing of the centurion's servant and the raising of the widow's son... the stories we zoomed in on last week. John sends them to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?" They are diligent... we hear them ask that exact question.

If we already know SOMETHING about John the Baptist, we're probably already confused. Most of us have read or heard stories of Jesus' Baptism in which John is clearly the baptizer and John declares him to be the one for whom he came to prepare the way. So this question seems weird- it seems like he's now doubting what he once knew... But... please flip back to Luke chapter 3. Let's zoom in on verse 15 "The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. John replied to them all, 'I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out.' With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.

"But Herod the ruler had been criticized harshly by John because of Herodias, Herod's brother's wife, and because of all the evil he had done. He added this to the list of his evil deeds: he locked John up in prison." Did you catch that? He locked John up in prison.

THEN we read: "When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.'" Who baptized Jesus? Luke doesn't say John did it. It may well have been one of John's disciples... John was in jail... not at the river. There is no evidence in the Gospel of Luke that John and Jesus had a face-to-face encounter in the river or anywhere, ever. The closest they come to a direct encounter in the story Luke tells is when their mothers get together during their respective pregnancies and

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John jumped in Elizabeth's womb when Mary approached with Jesus in her womb— This jump told Elizabeth that the child in Mary's belly was "her Lord." (You can see this a bit further back in Luke 1: 39-45.)

Further... what was John expecting from the Messiah for whom he was preparing the way? He was expecting one who would come in judgment with ax and fire. (I'm back in chapter 3... both what I read and earlier in that chapter (check out verses 7-9). He was expecting a revolutionary figure, one who would cast judgment on all that is wrong in the world and make all things right. And I think it is fair to say he was expecting an overthrow of the oppressive Roman Empire... of whom he was particularly critical... that's what landed him in jail...

So John hasn't had an opportunity to meet Jesus face to face. He is suffering under the oppression of the Empire, probably still in jail when he receives reports from his disciples and then sends them out... if not, he surely would have gone to see for himself. And the reports he is receiving from his disciples are surely impressive— healing the sick, raising the dead??? God must be in that. But where's the fire? Where's the judgment? Is he the one?? John has the humility, I think, to admit he might have been wrong... and the faith to keep seeking.

And when the disciples ask Jesus doesn't answer with words. He answers with actions— he heals, casts out evil spirits, restores sight... and then sends the disciples to tell John what they have seen and heard. The recitation of what is unfolding in his ministry is directly resonant with that passage from Isaiah he read in the synagogue in Nazareth— check out chapter 4:18-19 of Luke... he said this is what he came to do. And he's doing it. It's not what John was expecting, but surely it is a manifestation of the power of God. What did the people say at the end of our reading last week? "God has come to help our people." Healing, Raising, Proclaiming Good News to the Poor. There are political implications to the way Jesus showed up in the world and what he did... but he was not the political revolutionary many expected the Messiah to be. I don't quite know what to make of Jesus' last statement to John's disciples "Happy is anyone who doesn't stumble along the way because of me." But I think one possibility is that bringing expectations about who Jesus would be that don't line up with who

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Jesus actually is might cause one to stumble...

After John's disciples leave, Jesus leads the crowd in a reflection on who John is... He asks them repeatedly what it was that they went out into the wilderness, where John made his home, to see... the first two possibilities he raised seriously puzzled me "A stalk blowing in the wind?" or "A man dressed up in refined clothes?" He elaborates on the second, suggesting one should look in palaces for men in fine clothes, but the first has no elaboration. A stalk is a symbol of weakness in the Hebrew Scriptures. There is also a possibility that this is a veiled reference to Herod Antipas, the ruler who imprisoned and later beheaded John (see Luke 9:9). Herod put an image of a stalk on some of his coins. Herod is one who could be found dressed in fine clothes and living in a palace. But Jesus suggests that John, who made his home in the wilderness, and dressed humbly, and ate bugs... he has substantial power, but it is not power of this world. It isn't the kind of power that kings like Herod Antipas wield. He is a prophet, more than a prophet, Jesus says... the greatest human being ever born (sounds funny coming out of Jesus' mouth doesn't it?) He has a sure place in God's kingdom— perhaps the least place compared to prophets of old... but he has no place in the kingdoms of this world.

Our reading wraps up with Jesus suggesting the religious authorities are like fussy children who can't agree whether to play weddings or funerals. They reject John for his excessive fasting practices and Jesus for his questionable dinner company. John makes faithful people of his time uncomfortable because he separates himself from the table fellowship at the center of the covenant community. Jesus makes faithful people of his time uncomfortable because he refuses to limit his table fellowship to those deemed inside the bounds of the covenant community. Both men come bearing the power of God and challenging all the customary ways that power is ordered on earth. It doesn't look like earthly power. It isn't comfortable for earthly power.

Perhaps Jesus' last cryptic line in our reading today should be read in light of the challenge to power and expectations that was manifest in both John and Jesus— "But wisdom is proved right by all her descendants." Wisdom, the power of God, bringing insight and order to the world... if rulers rule rightly it is because they are accessing

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divine Wisdom... But rulers don't always rule rightly. Human power is not always ordered in alignment with God's will and wisdom. And God's power doesn't play by human rules.

What have we seen and heard in Jesus? Those who were blind, see. Those once deaf, hear. The sick are healed. The dead are raised. The poor hear GOOD NEWS. This is how God's power operates in the world- tending to the least and lost and bringing life and wholeness.

Just this week a couple came into the office seeking assistance. The husband is wheelchair bound having developed a degenerative condition three years ago. He requires constant care. His wife is caring for him. She can't work because of the care he requires. She was told by a caseworker to divorce her husband in order to be able to receive compensation for the care she is providing him. They can't get the diagnostic tests they need to get the coverage they require because insurance won't clear them for the tests. They are at the bottom of the housing authority list because they are a married couple and single parents with kids are given priority. They aren't hearing good news anywhere they go. They received help from our emergency fund, but it is a drop in a very large bucket. The husband is hoping that if the Affordable Care Act is repealed he'll end up with better health insurance. He is putting his trust in princes of this world like so many of us do (check out Psalm 146:3 for God's wisdom on THAT). He needs Jesus. He needs the power of God that heals and transforms and cares for the poor. We need to advocate with our elected officials on behalf of men and women like this who are so desperately in need- bringing the power revealed in Jesus before the powers that be. But we also need to be living in such a way that we are bringing good news to the poor, we are bringing life, healing and wholeness. We cannot seek salvation in the powers that be. We have a Savior and we are the disciples of that Savior. May we focus on that.

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