

2010 01 12 Emmanuel College Sermon:
"Who precedes me even though he is after me?"

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John 1:29-34

Bracketing Exercise...things we are not going to talk about

The Other Parts of the Pericope

The actual pericope for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany is the much longer John 1:29-42, which is easily divisible into three distinct segments, in other words enough texts for the better part of a month's worth of sermons. I have chosen to focus on the first segment, because it's first, and because there is more than enough textual grist to chew on for a full-length homily here, and because it's so intriguing.

The Major Big-time Doctrines that We Could Talk About But Won't

As you heard the text, you may have noticed are enough themes in this short passage to preach an entire sermon on soteriology [salvation theology] or Christology, Johannine Messianism, pneumatology and baptismal theology or the basis of the Trinitarian doctrine, (although I am glad to say Barnabas Lindars warns us "to guard against presupposing too easily that the christological statements in John mean exactly the same as later definitions"¹. I would like to focus specifically on the enigma of John the Baptist's relationship to with Jesus, in the fourth Gospel and some texts associated with it.

The Text as an Enigma

The Evangelist Thinks His Audience Is Dense

Viewed through a certain lens there is a way in which grace and all religion is both queer and can be quite funny. As we begin to move to the Carnival season, how about we have a little fun with this text?

One of the most amusing things about this text is that it's so stunningly repetitious, and draws on a very small vocabulary. In essence, each of the six verses repeats in a new way, or not so new way, what the previous verse has said.

¹ Barnabas Lindars, "John" in *The Johannine Literature*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, 32.

[NOTE: TWO VOICES! The Evangelists and John the Baptist's]

THE EVANGELIST TELLS US:

v. 29: John saw Jesus and announced, "THIS is the Lamb of God"

v. 30: THIS is the one, folks: the one who comes after John but who was really way more important because he was "before" him, gottit?

v. 31. Oh, did I mention, **John had no idea** for whom he was getting ready with all those water baptisms, but THIS is the one for y'all to see. Yup!

v. 32. BTW, did I mention John could actually prove THIS is the guy because he saw the Spirit descend as a dove and hover over him for like a long time?

v. 33. I may have mentioned this already, but in case you missed it, **John had no idea** what dude he was looking for but THIS is the one for whom all those water shows were a warm-up act, and like, he did see the Spirit descend on him and THIS is the one will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

v. 34. In case you missed it, John did say, "I know THIS is the guy, the one I've seen and who is divine spawn.

Despite its repetitiousness and limited vocabulary, these six verses are also like a flash card summary of the Gospel of John. Most of the great themes of John: life in the Spirit, Jesus as Lamb, redemption are anticipated here. If you want the unabridged version, turn to the high-priestly prayer.

Brain Teaser or Jewish Humour

Doubtless the most memorable brainteaser for the evangelist's audience here is that great one liner: "This is the one of whom I said, he who comes after me ranks before me because he was before me." This is a biblical version of either a Three Stooges movie or a Shakespearean Comedy of Errors. Who just went behind the curtain? When it leapt out at me this week it reminded me of those kid's jokes: "what is black and white and re(a)d all over?"

The most obvious and intuitive explanation for this verse, "this is he of whom I said he who comes after me precedes me because he was before me" is the evangelist's way of looping back to the prologue, and using John the Baptist's words to reiterate the theology of the pre-existing eternal logos now become flesh. But a text can be read at many levels! We forge on!

John the Baptist as a Warm-up Act or Best Man

This puzzle had been foreshadowed in v. 26, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

It is reiterated in 3:29, after John the Baptist denies to his own disciples [yet again!] that he is the Christ, the real McCoy and subordinates himself once more: “he who has the bride is the bridegroom, the friend who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Now it’s turned into a bromance! “I am just the bridegroom’s best friend. I have helped him come out, and now he’s getting married. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

But WHAT IS IT that is so much greater? What is this wisdom to which John the Baptist is subordinating himself?

How This Reads Our Lives: Searching and Transformation

When and where do we experience ourselves as John the Baptist Looking for that which we know not?

At a deep psycho-spiritual level, the enigma John the Baptist presents here is the one of the self-searcher, the person who lives with a sense of a veil, seeking to overcome whatever it is that prevents authentic living from occurring, knowing the deep inside there is a greater life, hidden, waiting to be lived.

I am looking for authenticity, I don’t know exactly what it will be but when I find it I will know it. I will know that it was deep inside me all along, it was there before me, but I missed it. [In the Enneagram, John the Baptist would definitely be a FOUR.]

Among the great themes of John’s gospel are ***truth, freedom and the abundant life in the Spirit***. John 10:10 “I come that you may have life, and life abundantly,” the “I am” sayings: vine, the Good Shepherd, the door, and the intertwined unity of the followers with Spirit/God/Jesus in the High Priestly Prayer.

When John meets Jesus, all humour aside, he is convinced that he has come face to face with truth, freedom and life. The encounter is life changing. THE question for us is, does the encounter with a text that witnesses to that encounter still have the power to open us to LIFE.

It reminds me of *The King’s Speech*, the cinema depiction of a journey from confined, fearful living to a fullness of life. Geoffrey Rush’s Lionel Logue plays John the Baptist to Colin Firth’s repressed Bertie. Growing up in the shadow of a dashing older brother, and cowed by a dominating father, a fear-filled childhood have all contributed to a prince who is afraid of his own voice, who with the help of his wife goes looking for LIFE. While the characters are drawn from the England’s House of Windsor, the story is a universal one, and one that in the grand theme is certainly to be found in John’s gospel.

What is the Transformation That Results?

In our encounter with this text we discover that at times we are in a John the Baptist mode: looking for something, the name of which we are uncertain and at other times we are in Lamb of God mode: we encounter an intensity of meaning and life so rich that it is ultimately unsustainable, but is a moment, to use John's image, when Water baptism is supplanted by Spirit baptism. It is the moment when we also recognize that our true and greater purpose was there before, but hidden, veiled or obscured. So in the moment when our inner John the Baptist and Jesus create fusion-like energy in us, we find the greater life which was there before, albeit unknown, or only known in the absence. And, this need not be, in most likely will not be a one-time event!

Robert Goss, in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, has described John's Gospel as one extended "coming out" story.² God comes out, and John the Baptist is the one who sees it first, and opens the closet door to reveal the incarnate logos.

How many untold ways is this "coming out" repeated in the realization of the abundant life? The depiction of Prince Albert was one, but how many ways has the joy been repeated:

The trans-person who claims his or her own true gender, possibly years of angst or searching through a veil might say with John, I did not know for whom I was looking, but when I found my gender, it was like the baptism of the Spirit, a new greater self has been born. And, with John he or she, knows that true life, true self was there before.

Does this speak to our life as a seminary community? Is not this the very purpose for which you have come to this place? To seek for a greater wisdom and purpose, not to be found in material success, but rather in spiritual depth and truth?

Is this not the deepest purpose of all Christian communities, or all spiritual communities even? To seek the deep, rich and true life in the Spirit of all Wisdom, that will point our way in the matters of justice, ethics and resistance to empire.

² Robert E. Goss, "John", *The Queer Bible Commentary*, Derwyn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West and Thomas Bohache, eds. London: SCM Press, 2006, 548 ff.

Hermeneutical Post-Script

Since many of us are preachers and others of us are preparing to be preachers, it seems like a good moment to step back from the homiletical exercise and look at what we have just done with this text.

As Tom Long says, “even the smallest biblical text is larger than any single sermon.”³ This very text that we have just teased out and played with will be the basis for countless sermons next Sunday when it is the lectionary reading.

If exegesis and hermeneutics work the way the Spirit intended every one of those sermons will be a unique exercise in turning text into life!

Text as Meaning-bearer in Our Lives

In today’s sermon we discover the gift of life. The exegetical moment is when we get inside the skin of the text, stretch it, test it, demand to know its claim on our lives and its claim on the world.⁴ The hermeneutical moment is when bursting through the skin of the text we discover that we are not so much reading, as being read by the text. Its claim remakes meaning in our lives, or as Barbara Lundblad says, “the text sits beside us like a conversation partner on the bus. Will we be open to a new hearing? ... This particular conversation has never happened before: this text speaking to these people in this time and place. Through such Spirit-born conversation, God is at work transforming memory into presence.” Barbara K. Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone*.⁵

³ Ibid.

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 100.

⁵ Ibid., 69.