

What About John?

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 8, 2023 – Epiphany Celebration Sunday

Text: Luke 3:1-17; 21-23

Welcome to this special celebration of Epiphany which officially marks our journey into the new year! This year is a little different than what we have done recently as we combine our observance of Epiphany Star Sunday with Baptism of Christ Sunday. For those new to our church, Star Sunday is a unique opportunity to reflect on God's presence in our lives over the past year at the same time we invite God into our lives in an intentional, direct way. This is accomplished through each person receiving an individual "Star Word" on Star Sunday. That Star Word is seen as an invitation to watch for God's presence in our lives through the ways we experience this Star Word in the coming year. Baptism of Christ Sunday, on the other hand, is one of those liturgical Sundays which recall a specific Sunday in the life of Jesus. In this case, we ponder Jesus' own baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist and its significance as the point at which Jesus' own ministry began when he was roughly 30 years old. You might be wondering how we can possibly combine these two differing themes into one worship service. Me too! Let's see how it goes.

We've just received our new Star Words for 2023. I know in years past we have used the sermon time on Star Sunday to share in more detail with each other how we experienced our Star Words from last year. Those are meaningful conversations, I know, and I hope they will continue during Fellowship time and other times when you are together over the course of the year. If I'm honest, that has always been my hope for Star Words you receive: that they will enable you to see God in the unfolding of your life every day AND that this is something you will want to share with other people in our church

more frequently than just once a year. But that, of course, is up to you!

Right now, I need us to focus a little bit on our Bible story for today from Luke. It was a long one – great job reading Christine! I needed it to be because I wanted to capture this character of John the Baptist more than we do when we just focus on Jesus being dunked under the water and re-emerging to the dove coming down from heaven. This story – the baptism of Jesus – appears in all four Gospels, although it is slightly different in each of them. Matthew and Luke are similar, but Luke goes into more detail about John. Mark's is very brief as one would expect from Mark. John's version is also typical of John. Incidentally, the John who wrote the Gospel and John the Baptist are NOT the same person. The John who wrote the Gospel is an interesting character. Tradition identifies him as John the son of Zebedee, one of the disciples, but many scholars doubt this to be the case. What we do know about John the Gospel writer is that he writes in a very unusual style and the story of Jesus' baptism is an excellent example of this. John doesn't describe the event as it happens, like the other three Gospels do. Instead, in Gospel-writer John's version, John the Baptist is talking to someone else about baptizing Jesus!

Back to John the Baptist as Luke describes him. This John is truly a fascinating person. Chapter 3 in Luke begins with a historical reference point as John began his ministry proclaiming God's Word. It also notes that John was the son of Zechariah. This is important because this connects the story about John back to the birth narrative of Jesus which begins in Luke 1 when Mary finds out she is to bear this special baby. Upon learning and accepting the situation, Mary goes off to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was also expecting a child after being barren for many years. Zechariah was Elizabeth's

husband, and the baby Elizabeth was carrying, the baby which leaped in her womb when Mary came into view, was John. This is a neat little reminder, easy to miss, that Jesus and John were cousins. Does that really matter? I'm not sure, to be honest. But I do find it curious, and definitely noteworthy that Luke goes out of his way to make that connection back to the birth narrative, emphasizing this family connection between Jesus and John.

John was indeed a character, very different from Jesus in many ways. For one, he was pretty hard to miss. He was loud and made a big deal out of living in the wilderness. No creature comforts for John! Matthew's Gospel describes him as wearing "clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist." In other words, his tunic was scratchy and most likely smelled, a lot. Matthew even goes so far as to describe John's menu as one living in the wilderness fulltime: he ate locusts and wild honey! Yikes! It's safe to assume, I think, that this was not what Jesus ate. Jesus presumably lived near to or with his mother in Nazareth where he practiced the profession of carpenter. He would have been dressed like everyone else and would have eaten the same food everyone else did. Jesus was definitely not the flashy type that his cousin John was.

John was also pretty dramatic, at least according to Luke. He went around quoting Isaiah, shouting "prepare the way of the Lord!" This is that famous phrase which begins the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and it owes its presence in the Jesus story to John because when Isaiah wrote those words, he was not writing about Jesus, even though Christians believe he was. The truth is that Christians read that meaning into Isaiah's words. He was actually writing about a great king who would be coming to Israel to rectify all the wrongs of the Babylonian captivity. But I digress. The point is that John was very dramatic. And because he was so very dramatic and such a real

character, people were fascinated by him. They flocked to see him and to hear what he was preaching. And I am sure they got quite the show! In Luke, John is quoted as raging at the folks who were coming to see him: “You brood of vipers!” he says. Well, that got their attention! Then he explains that they need to repent of all they have been doing wrong as they turned their backs on God. Bad times and tribulation are coming, he warns, and they needed to be ready, he screams at them.

So, of course, they ask him, “what then should we do?” This is where it gets interesting, and this is where we can see a direct link between what John is teaching and what will become a primary focal point of Jesus’ teachings in his three years of ministry. John tells the people that whoever has more than they need – coats, food – must share it with those who have none. He warned tax collectors to collect no more than was due. He warned soldiers not to use their positions of authority to extort money from people. In short, John was very clear in telling the people to stop focusing on themselves and start focusing on others as a way to get right with God. This, dear ones, is where we hear the first echoes of what would become Jesus’ Great Commandment – do to others what you would have them do to you. John preached it first. Jesus learned it from him.

It’s not surprising then, that the people started asking John if he was the long awaited Messiah and he quickly said no. In fact, he said he was not worthy to even remove the sandals of this one who would come after him. That one, he said, would not baptize with water but with fire and the Holy Spirit. This is a direct reference to what we know as Pentecost, which occurred after Jesus’ death when the tongues of fire appeared over the disciples as the Holy Spirit filled them with the power of God as they prepared to carry on Jesus’ work after his death and return to God. Luke also gives us a hint of what is

to happen to John as he explains that John's preaching was most upsetting to Herod, especially after John rebuked Herod for taking up with his brother's wife, Herodias. This would land John in Herod's prison and, lead eventually to his own death by beheading.

Luke's actual description of Jesus' baptism pales in comparison to all these insights he has just given us into John. It's a brief account of John baptizing all the people who wanted to be baptized and that Jesus was one of these. However, when Jesus came up out of the water and was praying, Luke describes a spectacular moment – the same moment our very own dove carved by Bob Sicilian seeks to capture and share with us week after week – “heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘this is my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

This is my Son, the Beloved. To provide the setting, the circumstances in which these words could be offered by God to Jesus himself, to John and to all the people who witnessed it – this was John's whole purpose. This was what John came to do – to introduce Jesus, to help Jesus to make the move from ordinary carpenter, the guy next door, to the Jesus who changed the world. It's pretty clear John knew this. And yet I have often wondered what would have happened had John not been arrested and eventually murdered by Herod. Would he and Jesus have eventually worked together, or would they perhaps have become competitors? This is not out of the question, had John not been killed. We forget that John was, and still is, a major religious figure in Christianity but also in Islam, and in other less well-known religious sects. The Mandeans, for example, still believe John was the greatest prophet, more important even than Jesus. ¹

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandaeism>

Thus, dear ones, I return to my original question for us this morning – what about John? Why should his story be important to us? What does John himself have to teach us? Well, for one, John is an incredible example of what it means to devote your entire life to what you believe, you *know*, is God’s intention for you. The way John lived, the way John taught and preached and baptized – all of it shows that John knew who he was and what God needed him to do, and he did it, without hesitation or regret. That alone makes him worthy of our deep and intentional consideration and reflection. But John was even more than that. Let me explain. John would have recognized that my dilemma about how to combine Star Sunday and Baptism of Christ Sunday was not really a problem. People without homes, or enough food to eat – that’s a problem. People being cheated by disreputable officials pretending to be something they aren’t – that’s a problem. People dying because they are denied access to life saving health care and medicines – that’s a problem. John the Baptist was an expert in identifying problems and making sure everyone knew about them. John was a person of deep faith who was also a devoted rabble-rouser who knew how to command an audience. He would have given any contemporary televangelist a run for their money, and then some. John was intent on making a real difference, and he did.

So, dear ones, as the end of our Epiphany celebration draws near, I invite you to consider your Star Word for this year and dare to see John the Baptist’s influence in it. Dare to be bold in taking this year’s word to heart. Dare to talk about it, to proclaim it, to the other people in your life. Hold it in prayer each morning and be open to where it leads you as you find your way forward into 2023. I’m here if you want some assistance in your reflections. Keep your Star Word close, and as you do, may God open your mind and heart to all its possibilities. Amen.