

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 3:15-22

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The story of John the Baptist and Jesus in Luke begins at 3:1 and includes the baptism of Jesus. The story has been fragmented in the lectionary into three little pieces and this is the last of those pieces. This treatment of John in the lectionary at its worst: a radical deconstruction of Luke's story so that it can be theologically interpreted. It literally destroys the story that Luke created. I strongly urge you to tell the whole story, Luke 3:1-22. It's not that long and it's a very interesting and compelling story. For each of these weeks in the lectionary when the story of John the Baptist is identified as the story of the week, I'd suggest you tell the whole thing.

The logic of the story is that John the Baptist is the one who establishes the foundation for Jesus' ministry and proclaims the coming of the Kingdom of God. He proclaims it both in word and in his sacrament of baptism. The tradition of Jesus has adopted John's sacrament of baptism as a central sacrament for the religion. Thus, what John the Baptist established has been continued throughout the last 2000 years in the sacrament of baptism.

John's preaching is followed by his arrest by Herod (Luke 3:18-20). Luke does not tell the story of John's execution as do Mark and Matthew. Therefore, this is, on the one hand, Luke's acknowledgment of John's death, although it is only implied by his being arrested and thrown into prison by Herod. On the other hand, it is also a telling of the whole story of John the Baptist: his preaching, baptizing, and arrest after his condemnation of Herod Antipas for his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife.

Jesus then comes after John. Jesus' baptism chronologically comes before John's arrest but Luke tells about the baptism after the story of John's arrest. Jesus' baptism is thereby made part of John's ministry of baptizing. The implication is that John baptized Jesus along with all the people.

John's preaching is specifically apocalyptic: it looks forward to the establishment of the kingdom of God. His baptizing is therefore a preparation for that apocalyptic event. The way in which this is normally told is as judgment. This is often heard as a sermon that is meant to scare people. The question that is implicit in this story is "How is this good news?"

The assumption in this story is that the people who are listening are the wheat: those who will be gathered in by the Messiah and by the representatives of God. The chaff represents the Gentiles. So the reason why John's preaching was seen as good news is that it affirms the hope of the people of Israel that they would be vindicated against the enemies. They will have a new government, a new nation established by God. And the

Gentiles would be wiped out so that finally Israel would receive its consolation and the Gentiles would be defeated.

Jesus reinterprets this understanding of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The first sign of that is Jesus' baptism. The climax of the baptism story is God speaking to Jesus as his son. The way in which this is usually told is in a kind of booming authoritative voice. It is far more likely that it was told as the intimate voice of a proud and loving father who is delighted with his son. In this way it has the same spirit as the story of Matthew where Joseph takes the baby in his arms and calls his name Jesus. That's the spirit here. It's the spirit of a father looking at his son and telling him, "I love you and I'm really proud of you." The voice from God, from heaven, is a loving voice. It is an intimate voice that is the foundation of a new government, of a new kingdom based on the intimacy of relationship between father and son and between the son and his subjects, the citizens of this new kingdom. That is what needs to be conveyed in the telling of the story.

This is then a story of the coming of the government of God into the world. It is established by repentance, by putting on a new brain, turning your mind around. In this instance, it is to turn your mind around in relation to how God will establish the kingdom. He will establish it by baptism, by the entry of people into a new way of life, a new pattern for the government in the world rather than by military force. Furthermore, God's son will establish it.