

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 11:2-11

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

This is the story of John's question of Jesus about whether he is the one who is to come (that is, the Messiah) followed by Jesus' comments about John the Baptist.

The tone of this is established by John's disciples, his students, coming to Jesus and asking the question about Jesus' identity. Jesus answers them sympathetically and then addresses the crowds about John.

You as the storyteller are Jesus addressing the audience as the disciples of John who have come to question him. Then you are speaking to the audience as the crowd who are interested in John. They have presumably come out into the wilderness to be baptized by John. Jesus' speech communicates his respect for John and his message that Jesus is now continuing because John has been arrested.

In the background of this story is the assumption that Jesus was in a sense John the Baptist's student. John the Baptist was Jesus' mentor.

The specific elements of Jesus' speech are:

1. The signs of the Messiah, John's question and Jesus' answer
2. The response and the inquiry to the crowds about what they came out to see, the signs for which they were looking
3. The signs of a prophet
4. Praise of John the Baptist

The verbal threads linking the episodes are:

1. The "soft robes" connect the second and third episodes
2. Question of a prophet and indeed more than a prophet
3. John as "the messenger who is sent ahead of you" and "I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way." These phrases link the last episodes.

The spirit of this story is a spirit of tough-minded, even skeptical, inquiry to which Jesus responds sympathetically. It's like an ancient press conference. Jesus' speech to the crowds expresses his appreciation and respect for John.