

“So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.” (3:18-20)

These verses have been left out of today’s Gospel reading by those we call, fondly, the Lectionary Loppers. Why read them, then? Or, why has Luke put John’s imprisonment here, anyway? The narrative and the day are all about the Baptism of Jesus. Herod’s shutting up John in prison seems like an interruption. And it’s odd, out of order: John’s locked up before Jesus is even baptized.

Maybe the author wants to get John out of the way, move our attention onto Jesus. Except that this order risks doing the opposite: it calls attention to John, makes us puzzle over this seeming intrusion of “too much information.”

Look at what is happening:

Herod the ruler has shut up John the prophet, that troublesome, critical voice. John’s good news preached to the people, is not good news to Herod. John exhorts those who ask, in response to his preaching, “What then should we do?” *Share. Don’t cheat or extort. Don’t bully.* (3:10-14). Herod’s course has been set on a contrary tack, including taking possession of his brother’s wife, Herodias. He hasn’t asked John for advice; but John has fired off his rebuke, nonetheless.

So Herod has shut him down. John’s getting way too much attention from the people. A real trouble maker. This is the way of tyrants. Herod is not the first to deal with dissent and opposition by suppressing, silencing it. He is far from the last.

What happens to John here, at the anointing of Jesus for his public ministry gives us a taste of what lies ahead for Jesus himself. When he’s become too much of an irritant, a threat, the religious and political powers that be will make the same move with him: shut him up, shut him down, put him to death.

Now look at what happens in quick order when Jesus has been baptized:

Just as we’ve heard that John has been shut up and shut down, “when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized . . . *the heaven was opened . . .*”

Herod’s move is to shut down, to isolate and silence one who tells the truth: about Herod, about humanity, about the more powerful one who is coming after him.

But God's move is to open up: to bring together God's self and humanity, heaven and earth; to speak love and favor to the one who will reveal the depth of God's love and favor for the world.

The move of the powerful tyrant, is to close his grip to control people and information.

The move of God is to open wide, to reveal God's self, to set us free, to bring us together, to welcome us home.

Jesus is baptized along with everybody else: "now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized . . ." It is not even clear that John has any idea he's baptized the one he's been telling the people about, the more powerful one whose sandals he is not worthy to untie. There's no hint of any recognition here. (Later, John will hear in prison of Jesus' teaching, preaching and healing. He'll send word to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (7:18-19))

The emphasis here at the Jordan is not on Jesus' baptism, *per se*, not on its uniqueness; rather, on God's response. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Beloved, pleasing precisely because he has cast in his lot fully with all the people, has opened himself fully to everything we experience in this life: all the joys, all the suffering and the sorrows.

Immediately following Jesus' baptism, in Luke, comes something you'll never find in any lectionary: the genealogy of Jesus, one of those long lists of unfamiliar and unpronounceable names that turn up in Scripture. (Don't worry, I won't read it to you.)

There are a few familiar names, including Joseph, David, Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, the father of Israel. But Luke traces Jesus' family tree even farther back than the beginning of God's chosen people. Noah's name is here. And Jesus' family tree goes *all* the way back; he is "son of Adam, son of God. Jesus is connected with *all* humanity through the first human being, *ha adam* (Heb., *the human*). In Adam, he is connected, also, with the whole earth, all creation, because the human, *ha adam*, was made of the earth, *adamah*.

Can't be more connected with humanity and the earth than that. Here, in choosing to be baptized with all the people, Jesus shows his that he accepts God's purpose: that in him the way is open for all people to be reconciled to God and one another; for heaven and earth truly to be joined.

When we are baptized, we are joined with God in Jesus, in this work of reconciliation. As the Samaritans were brought into the mission of the first century Church. That's right, *Samaritans*. As we hear in the Book of Acts, "*Samaria* had accepted the word of God," that is the good news of Jesus the Messiah, God's anointed. (8:4-8).

There are just a few verses here, but this is huge. This is the first stretch for the early Church. Samaritans are the first believers who are not Jews, not insiders accepted as God's chosen people. Samaritans had been scorned as unorthodox for centuries, for 700 years. Their worship and traditions were corrupted by foreigners planted there by Assyrian conquerors, for the very purpose of diluting the cultural and religious identity of the conquered. There was long standing, deeply rooted division and hostility between these near neighbors: Galilee, Judea/Jerusalem and Samaria.

This is pushing the envelope for the Jerusalem church. Even as the church carries the gospel out from Jerusalem because of fierce persecution there, these first followers of Jesus begin to get the message: *This is way bigger than yourselves*. Always a mixed message to hear, both welcome and discomfiting.

No wonder the Jerusalem church sent Peter and John to Samaria—to check out these new believers. And, good for the church, good for Peter and John, to want to do this. Good for them for being curious about the unexpected, for being open to welcoming and including not just any foreign believers, but long despised Samaritans; for laying hands on them, a people they have considered unclean.

You might wonder why, if the Samaritans already have been baptized, they have not also already received the Holy Spirit. There's no explanation given; I don't know why. But whatever the reason, the result is clear: this visit becomes the opportunity for Peter and John to become channels for the Holy Spirit and demonstrate the breadth and depth of God's new covenant in Jesus. They are major apostles and leaders in the Jerusalem church. Their inclusion of Samaritans in the church sets a precedent that will be hard for us to back away from: the bringing back together of peoples who had long been separated, a dramatic sign of God's love and favor for *all* people. You'll remember that the oldest churches outside Jerusalem also are found among ancient enemies of ancient Jerusalem: Egypt (the Copts), and Syria.

When we follow Jesus into the waters of baptism, or reaffirm our baptismal vows, we declare our own commitment to live lives that are open to the surprising and often challenging movement of the Holy Spirit. We renounce the efforts of all the world's Herods, whether secular or religious, to shut out the possibility of new life; to shut up the voices that tell us the truth about ourselves and about God; to shut down the hope of those who are poor, under served, marginalized; to shut off the beginnings of a more just order, in the Church or in the world.

We declare ourselves, instead, partners in God's movement in Jesus to open the realm of God. We affirm that we are open to the Spirit's leading. Open to God's desire for harmony. Remembering that harmony, by its nature, involves the sounding of more than one note and one line. Harmony often is dissonant as well as consonant, disturbing as well as pleasing. There are notes that blend, but also notes that clash. Not all dissonance is resolved quickly, or even to our particular taste.

In baptism, we declare ourselves open to hearing the truth about ourselves, however troublesome. We commit ourselves to giving voice to hope; to support and nurture new life; to open ourselves to the transforming power of God and be channels of that power in the world around us.

Always remembering that, whatever the efforts of human authorities to shut it down, nothing will stop the power of God. Nothing will stop the voice of God.

“The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice; the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedar trees . . . makes Lebanon skip like a calf . . . splits the flames of fire” and “shakes the wilderness . . .” The voice of the LORD will not be silenced. It will be heard in the voices of the prophets and all the people of God

Let us stand and renew our Baptismal Vows, on this feast of the Baptism of our Lord. (Book of Common Prayer, page 292.)