

I sometimes wonder how well John the Baptist and Jesus knew each other growing up. What did they know about one another? We know they were cousins because of their mothers. Elizabeth, John's mother and Mary's cousin, is the one Mary goes to visit after her encounter with the angel who asks her to bear God's son. Elizabeth is also with child – John – and that child in the womb leaps for joy when Mary shares her news. John and Jesus certainly don't act as if they were related. From various texts we know that they have heard of each other. John was from Judea and Jesus from Nazareth. Judea could have covered a large area, but if John was near Jerusalem, Jesus would have been growing up just over 60 miles away – not a short distance especially in those days.

I think about my own cousins – some are good friends, others I know from regular family gatherings from when I was growing up, but what I knew about them came mostly from my mother and father. Then there were those distant cousins who I knew existed and that was about it. I wonder what my cousins would say about me – perhaps a scientist turned priest, who loves to tease and will listen if you are in trouble. In families, whether you are close to one another or distant, there is often a sense of who you are.

And so I wonder what Jesus would have said about John. Over the summer, I read a book called *The Book of Longing*. It is about a member of Jesus' family, but you hear about Jesus and how he moves into and through his ministry. Listen to how Jesus tells his family about John as they sat around the cooking fire. Jesus described the sensation John the Immerser was causing with great hosts of people flocking into the desert east of Jerusalem, so impassioned they waded into the river shouting and singing and afterward gave away their cloaks and sandals. Jesus said "I met two men near Cana who heard him preach firsthand. He urges people to repent and turn to God before it's too late. They say he condemns Herod Antipas for his disregard of the Torah. John preaches that the day of judgment is close when God will intervene to repair the world. Already people are saying John is the Messiah priest. If that's so, the Messiah king will appear soon." Jesus' mother said to him. "Son, this man you describe could be a prophet or a madman—who's to say?" James, Jesus' brother, hurried to join in his mother's dissuasion. "We cannot know what manner of man he is or whether the things he says are truly from God." Jesus stood and placed his hand on his mother's arm. "Mother, you are right to ask these questions. James, you are right, too. Sitting here, we cannot know." "I've decided to travel to Judea and discover for myself," he said. "I will leave tomorrow at dawn."¹

I wonder what we would have said about John the Baptist if we lived at that time. Would we lean towards prophet or madman? Would we be intrigued enough to travel to learn more? Would we go and witness the preaching of John firsthand and then tell others about what we had seen?

That's the power of witness. It pulls us in. It invites us to learn more. John's witness has had the power to keep inviting people in to learn more over 2000 years. We have come to understand that John was preparing the way for Jesus who is the light of the world, regardless of how well they actually knew each other. John's witness continues to be one that we hear to this day especially at Advent when we are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus. However, his wasn't crystal clear. Priests and Levites come from Jerusalem to ask him who he is. He says "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"

John's life and preaching continues to witness all these years later. Which brings me to the question of our witness to the world. What will our cousins say we are about? Our friends, our co-workers, our children? We may not be a prophet in the wilderness crying out – prepare the way of the lord, but be assured my friends – we are witnesses – our words and our actions all tell others about what we are about, just as our words and our actions

¹ Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Book of Longings* (p. 213- 214). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

form who we are known to be in our own families. And like John, we have to expect that our witness may be come with confusion. Witnessing is not easy.

Think about the witness of those who you have been around this week. What did they proclaim to you through what they said and did? Are they ready for Christmas or very far behind? Did you find out they had given up on trying to celebrate Christmas this year? Perhaps they are living in the horror of watching Covid infections rise and rise? Perhaps they are worried over the wellbeing of a loved one? Is their prayer life holding them up? Is their faith strong or are they wondering where God is? What message did they leave you with?

And now think about your witness this past week? Did you point to the light of the world, to the power of Jesus to bind up the brokenhearted and be with us in the worst of times? Did you show in your actions how Jesus loves this world? In all we do we witness, and remember that people may not hear us and that's OK. Many did not understand John's witness at the time but many did. Therefore its important is that we witness because we don't know who needs it.

This pandemic actually gives us cause to witness. I was talking to a woman this week who said. I never did (witness) before, but I have been so excited about how much I have gotten out of our online services, that I have been sharing it with others. This women is witnessing and not only is she witnessing, she is witnessing to the power of having God in your life. She is testifying to Jesus - the light of the world.

My friends witnessing is our work and it is so important in this challenging and scary time. Our witness is needed because our words and actions can shore up those who are very poor in spirit. Our witness has the power to remind the world of God's love for each of us. Our witness points toward the fact that Jesus is the light of the world and during Advent we proclaim that light is both on the way and already here. Like John, witnessing as best as we can is the work we have been called to do and we are witnessing to nothing less than the power and presence of Jesus Christ in this world. Amen.