

## Sermon 1 12&13 19

What is it like? To be a leader, an inspired leader, an inspiring leader? Someone with strong convictions and a strong following? Someone who believes God is leading him or her?

What was it like for John the Baptist to feel called and to be known across the land, admired and even feared, and yet to know that he was only the introduction, destined to disappear just as the main story was beginning.

Kickers in football come to mind. They are specialists. All they do is kick. But they have to be able to kick *well!*

Everybody gets all set up out on the field — and then one guy comes out — and someone holds the ball for him — and he kicks — and then he runs off the field - forgotten until he's needed again. He starts everything - gets it going - and then he's gone.

John was known throughout the land. He was clearly a strong-minded man, a man of conviction. And yet he knew, probably for his entire life, he knew that however well he prepared, however hard he worked, however well he did what God asked him to do, he knew he had to face the truth of, "He must increase and I must decrease." There was no avoiding his role in history. The story had to be told. It had to play out. Because if he truly believed in everything he said, that there was a Messiah, a Savior sent by God, then he had to play the part God gave to him.

To be able to do that... The strength of character it must have taken for him to look at himself in the context of the whole story of Jesus, in the context of all of history and say "Yes. This is where I belong. God, you have given me a job to do and I'm going to do it." And then I'm gone. "He must increase and I must decrease." "I must be less for his sake and for your sake, God, and for the sake of all humanity."

There was a point, after John was arrested by Herod, and Jesus had begun his ministry, preaching and healing, when John sent a message to Jesus through two of his followers, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" He asked that question as much for his followers' sake as for his own. "Is my part done yet? Do they go on with you?" And some of his followers *did* become Jesus' disciples. But what a sad plaintive question!

When I was in Israel we toured a building that historians are pretty sure was the palace of Caiaphas, the High Priest. In the basement of that palace there were prison rooms. They were basically holes in the earth - no bars - no gates. Prisoners were lowered or thrown down into the holes and left there. No light - nothing. To sit there in total darkness and wonder if you've done what God wanted, if you've done the right thing. John was not divine. He wasn't a god. He was a man, an ordinary human being. He had doubts. "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered John's question by pointing to the evidence of what he was doing among the people. I think we can presume that John's followers reported that back to John. And he knew. His part was over. "I must decrease."

But to return to our Gospel for today, John told the people even then, right away, in no uncertain terms, that he was *not* the Messiah. "One who is more powerful than I is coming." He knew who he was. And then this sturdy, probably frightening wild man dressed in animal skins, said of Jesus, "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals." What did it take to say that? And to really mean it? To give way like that? To give up power and authority like that?

True humility is hard. This was a man used to standing up to a king and to high priests - to *everybody*, speaking truth to power. He had authority. What did it take to give it up? And to hand it over?

Every once in a while, God reminds us, "I'm God and you're not." "I'm very real and present and a part of your life. And I'm God. And you're not. You have to have faith"

God requires us to have faith.

What I believe is that John was able to overhear, was given the assurance and gift of seeing and overhearing, after everyone was baptized and heaven was opened and Jesus was praying and the Holy Spirit descended upon him, I believe that John was able to overhear and be assured, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Because I think John could then know that God was pleased with him too, that he had prepared the way as he had been told. And we can know that when we follow the path set before us by God, in faith, we can be assured that God is well pleased with us, that God is with us.