Cousin John Must Have Known

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We don't know much about Jesus and John. It's traditional to call them cousins, because their mothers were relatives. We've got the story of John's dad, a big-deal high priest, who ought to have recognized the mysterious stranger. Being a priest, and being in the holiest inner sanctum in the Temple, you'd think he'd be able to recognize an angel, but no. John grew up around the Temple, in line to be a priest himself, but unlike his dad, he was tuned in to the spiritual world, and heard a very specific message: something big is coming, so people need to straighten themselves out before it happens.

We've got the story of the two cousins *in utero,* when the pregnant Mary arrives for an extended visit, the Christ Child safe inside her. The unborn John jumped for joy inside Elizabeth. She immediately recognized what it meant.

But did the "cousins" ever hang out? Jesus lived up north in Nazareth, learning to be a carpenter. John grew up down south in Jerusalem, learning to be a priest. Neither one ended up following his father's occupation. John went wild. He left the clean linen vestments, and went down beyond the Dead Sea to eat locusts and wild honey. To wear animal skins. He became a prophet, and invented a kind of sacred bath in the holy River Jordan. Were his parents proud of him? Embarrassed?

But I bet the two cousins *did* see each other as they grew up. Maybe at holidays, when Jesus' family went to the capital for the great festivals like Passover. Did they stand together and watch their families' sheep be slaughtered? Did John's dad help oversee the ritual that whole afternoon? At dinner, or when they were walking around town, did they talk about sports? Roman chariot races? Greek-style athletics? Gladiators, even? All taboo for good Jewish boys.

I'm guessing John got more education than Jesus, but it was Jesus that wowed the rabbis with his questions and answers at age twelve. Was cousin John there when Mary and Joseph were worried sick when Jesus wasn't with their traveling party? Did John think Jesus was being kind of disrespectful, to his folks, *Hey, just chill, mom and dad! Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?* No. They didn't. Did John?

When the cousins were about thirty, and John was already being a hippie in the desert, Jesus turned up to be baptized. The way Matthew tells the story, John suggested that Jesus didn't need sanctifying, that maybe they should trade places. But Jesus insisted. A minute later, a voice from heaven says *this is my beloved son, with whom I am delighted.* Did John think, *yep?*

John *had to know!* But maybe not. *We* know now. We've heard the whole story, including this morning's portion. Forgive me for repeating now what Rex just read so clearly:

John's in prison, in trouble for denouncing the King. He sends some followers to catch up with cousin Jesus and ask him a question: *are you The One, or should we keep waiting?* Jesus told them to give John a checklist. Six specific things:

- ☐ **Blind see**
- ☐ **Lame walk**
- ☐ **Lepers made clean**
- ☐ **Deaf hear**
- ☐ **Dead are raised**
- ☐ **Poor hear good news.**

The Checklist for recognizing the Messiah. But Jesus left one thing off the usual list:

- ☐ **Prisoners set free.**

If that detail got overheard in the jail, the police might come for Jesus next. And anyway, it's true: the prisoner everyone can't help thinking about–cousin John–isn't set free. He's beheaded so the King can show off to his creepy friends.

Anyway, the messengers leave, and Jesus turns to the crowd and tells them, *you know how great John is. He understands that God is about to do a new thing. There's never been a greater prophet on this earth. But there's more than just this earth, as I have been telling you. There's the kingdom of heaven. The reign of God. And no offense to my cousin, but the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. And he knows it: he told people he wouldn't even deserve to tie the messiah's shoelace.*

A couple of months ago, I spoke from this pulpit about this kingdom of heaven, calling it an alternate universe. Physicists talk about a space-time different from the one we know, perhaps occupying other dimensions. Jesus spoke about an alternate way of being where there is no suffering.

No oppression. No ignorance. It's not Eden: there is no forbidden knowledge. Not a fluffy-cloud world where we all go after we die to play the harp. This alternative universe is within us. It's *right here.* His mother Mary sang about it when she became pregnant with him. Kind of an upside-down world, where the rich will envy what the poor have got. Elizabeth sang about it, too. And his cousin John knew the place, too. *Listen,* he told people, *the rough roads all go smooth there. The hills go flat. Contradictions make sense.*

So I have to imagine that John already knew the answer to his question: yes, cousin, I'm the one we have been waiting for. John didn't dare send another message: *watch yourself, cuz. Look what they are doing to me.*

Watch yourself, indeed, cuz. What happens to people like John? They both knew the answer: violence. Martyrdom at best, humiliation for sure. Or you're just forgotten and you made no difference. Nobody except maybe Jesus knew that God would turn martyrdom into something more than just sad. Nobody except maybe Jesus knew how God would reveal more of the alternate universe made of love, flexibility, and insight.

In two weeks, ready or not, Christmas will come, and we'll be pretty much forced to turn our attention to the birth of a baby who would grow up to be uniquely aware of the alternate universe he called the kingdom of heaven.

- The baby whose family had to flee because the word got out about a future Jewish king.
- The baby who would grow up to ride a donkey into Jerusalem, gently mocking the Roman governor's arrival mounted on a horse, with banners and armed cavalry.
- The baby who would one day be arrested and "crowned" with a ring of thorns.

–Where are you from, Pilate would ask.

– My kingdom is not of this world, Jesus would reply.

– {chuckling} No, it wouldn't be, would it?

And then the same governor would show him off to the crowd and joke that he could either release their quote-unquote "king" or crucify him. *You <u>really</u> want me to crucify <u>your king</u>?* The governor's wife would later warn him not to mess with this Jesus. She had a bad feeling about it.

My dad used to get depressed at Christmas time. Sad. We couldn't cheer him up, though he would try to go along. He'd lost both parents and both siblings by the time he was 45, and he also suffered with doubt that he'd really done his best at work. He ran his dad's machine shop in Detroit that my sister now manages. He was a brilliant engineer. And he worked his ass off.

He also sang. Bass harmony. Embarrassingly loud. Really good singing. Joy to the World! Glory to the newborn king! But Henry's cup of Christmas cheer was always half-empty. He knew he should probably feel proud or content, but so much remained to be done, and the world was so unfair. So hard.

Although I am temperamentally more of an optimist than he was, I recognize the truth of my dad's lament. The grief. Lynnell was telling me the other day about something she read online, about grief always living inside you and just appearing whenever it wants. Not necessarily at a funeral or a hospital bedside. Not even at a service of loss and remembrance. We carry so much grief inside us and don't even know it half the time. Unexpressed grief, the secret cause of so much anxiety.

But music helps me. A lot. I regularly thank Chad for playing something and making me cry. I might not even know what the tears are exactly about. Who I am mourning. He just puts his soul into it.

Two of our daughters-in-law gave birth to baby boys this summer, our first grandchildren. Cousins who live far apart. Maybe that's why my heart fills with dread and admiration for Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth and Zachariah. Why I wonder how John and Jesus could stay so strong, so courageous, and march into the valley of the shadow of death.

The Way of Love we talk so much about? It is not just a happy road, even if I am mostly a happy man. There is no avoiding the injustice, the cancers, the heartbreaks, the cruelty. You have to go through it, like John and his cousin.

My own favorite Christmas song is a sad one, so I am pretty sure it isn't *your* favorite. *A Stable Lamp Is Lighted,* is a song by Richard Wilbur and David Hurd. They tell the truth, but they tell it slant, as Dickinson would say, about the birth we look forward to. Yes, there is a wonderful alternate universe, but even in a whole lifetime very few of us master the art of finding it. For the most part, life is what the Buddha said: full of suffering, selfish craving, and disappointment. The way to resurrection leads through all that, we've got to believe it does, and so we hold our little lights up and walk on, cherishing the hope that John the Baptist really knew. That Mary of Nazareth really knew. That they didn't just *think so.* They *knew.* Sing it with me: Hymn 104.