

A God Who Will Not Keep His Distance

Mark 1:1-8

I always enjoy hearing Bette Midler's song *From a Distance*. Perhaps you know how it goes. It describes a world of natural beauty and of harmony among people. The song ends with these lines: "It's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves. This is the song of every man. God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us, From a distance."

The image I have is one of an ideal world with a benevolent deity smiling in the background. God is there, but he is not needed so he stays at a distance. Sometimes it seems it's not so bad having a God who is removed. A God who stays apart doesn't interfere in our lives. God is there when you want him, but he doesn't bother you. Such an arrangement can be rather comfortable.

However, when Bette Midler's song ends, I realize that I really don't want that kind of God. The world is not a place of peace and harmony. My life is not as well ordered and peaceful as I need for it to be. I see pain and need in my own experience and in the lives and relationships of persons all around me. I don't want God to be some kind of CEO of the universe; I want God to share my lot and to allow me to live in relationship with him.

That's why I am so fond of the season of Advent and the celebration of Christmas. Here we have beautiful and powerful reminders that God will not keep his distance. God has chosen to be involved in our lives and to make us his own, even to give us his own Spirit.

That message today comes from a man who was not that appealing, one who is usually omitted from the Christmas story. Have you ever seen a Christmas card featuring John the Baptist? I haven't. John was a rough character. It is said that he wore garments of skins, apparently in protest of the fine clothing of the affluent. He did not preach "peace on earth, good will toward men"; he proclaimed the judgment of God. He wasn't very polite. When the religious authorities from Jerusalem went out to "dialogue" with him, he called

them snakes. We try to ignore John, much like we do the wacky relative who seems to say the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Yet John holds a prominent place in the story of Jesus. The gospels call him the forerunner, the herald of Jesus. And Jesus himself had high regard for his cousin. He once said that “among all who have been born, no one has been greater than John” (Luke 7:28).

John came onto the scene as a voice in the prophetic tradition crying (in the words of Isaiah), “Prepare the way for the Lord; clear a straight path for him.” The picture describes the clearing and widening of the road so that all persons may gather and greet the arrival of a king or leader. John saw the coming of a new kingdom and a new king.

Clear the way, he preached. Get rid of the spiritual clutter and the debris that obstruct our vision and our ability to receive. The approach is repentance, the change of mind and heart that open us to something greater. And what is there to receive? We are to be aware that God is present and that God is within us. Hear how John stated this: “After me comes one mightier than I am, whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and unfasten. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

If you put together the two primary themes in John’s preaching—the clearing of the way and the baptism of the Spirit—what you have is the amazing truth that God will not keep his distance. God is making his way toward us and God is coming to fill us with his Spirit.

We don’t always get that, partly because we shy away from what seems to be very strange language. This week, in my reading of the lectionary passage, I have been thinking about a phrase that I usually ignore. I have been asking all week what John could have meant when he said that the coming one would “baptize with the Holy Spirit.” My guess is that you don’t often dwell on that, either. What does the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” mean?

The expression has disturbing associations for us. It calls up ideas of persons who might be called “holy rollers” or who might speak in tongues. The “baptism of the Spirit” seems to belong to another religious tradition. In fact, we seldom speak of the Holy Spirit at all. Even the Apostles’ Creed offers no help. It affirms only that “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” There is no definition and no elaboration.

It is either a flaw or strength of mine to try to reduce things to their simplest expression. This is how I have come to see this promise. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of love conveyed in Jesus Christ. If, as John said, Jesus came to baptize us with the Holy Spirit, then he came to assure us that we are fully immersed in God and that God is fully dwelling within us. We still baptize with water, as John did. We do so to symbolize change and belonging. But Christ has given us the baptism of the Spirit, not something to dread or to fear, but something to receive and to celebrate.

God will not keep his distance. Advent tells us that. And it tells us to prepare. John was right. We need to get our hearts ready to receive what God reveals to us. Last week I ran across a story out of West Africa called the Legend of the Sky Maiden. According to this story, members of a tribe were troubled because their cows were giving less milk than usual. They could not understand what was happening to their herd. One young man volunteered to stay up all night and watch over the cows. In the middle of the night a beautiful maiden rode down on a moonbeam from the heavens carrying a large pail. She milked the cows and returned with the milk to the heavens.

The next night the young man set a trap and caught the maiden. She confessed that she was taking the milk to her tribe in the sky. The young man agreed to release her if she would consent to marry him. She promised to do so if he would give her three days in the heavens to prepare herself. The Sky Maiden kept her promise. She returned with a large box that she placed in the hut where she would live until the wedding. She made her future husband vow never to look into the box. After a while, he could no longer endure the

suspense. When she was in the fields, he opened the box. He saw nothing in it. The girl returned. "You looked, didn't you?" she said. "What's so terrible about that?" he asked. "The box was empty."

It was then that the Sky Maiden made her decision. "I cannot marry you," she said, "not because you opened the box, but because you do not understand me. The box wasn't empty. It was full of sky. It contained the light, the air, the smells of my home in the sky. When I last went home, I filled the box with everything precious to me to remind me of home. How can you and I be together if everything precious to me is emptiness to you?"

That is why preparation and repentance are so important for us. If we are to be aware of a God who comes to us, we must ready our hearts and minds to receive him. God has made his decision. God will not keep his distance. What about our decision?

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