

*Undress Them*

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 | John 1:6-8, 19-28

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I

Dr. Paul Farmer operates medical clinics through an organization he founded called Partners in Health. His medical group was among those who responded to the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa six years ago. He chronicles all this in a fascinating new book called *Fevers, Feuds, and Diamonds*. He describes how Ebola was such a terrifying illness that it paralyzed the whole healthcare infrastructure. On his first clinical visit to Liberia he noticed patients weren't even being treated for their illness. They were simply being quarantined and isolated. The result was that Ebola mortality in West Africa was more than 50% whereas almost all patients who received treatment for Ebola in the United States or Europe survived the disease. Ebola was so scary, Farmer writes, that most medical and public health professionals gave up on trying to treat it. But he says the unequal and inequitable world we've created is more dangerous than the disease itself. Where our systems were organized to provide care, the virus was much less deadly. "Giving all the credit to the virus is dubious when we humans have been the architects of the stunning inequalities that characterize our shared world."

II

Someone told me this week that the Gospel of John could have done a better job with the character of John the Baptist. He's just not very interesting, they said, and I agree. He's such a colorful character in the other gospels, but in John's gospel, John the Baptist is pretty boring. Think of it this way. You're a James Bond fanatic. You've seen Sean Connery play 007 in *Dr. No*, you've seen Sean Connery in *From Russia With Love*, you've seen Sean Connery in *Goldfinger*. Over the first five Bond films, you come to associate Sean Connery with 007. His Scottish accent, his swagger, his style, his sex appeal. When they finally cast a new Bond, George Lazenby in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, it's just not the same. Where's the flair? Where's the humor? This guy's not James Bond.

So it is with John the Baptist, the older and coarser associate of Jesus introduced to us in the first three gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all play up the eccentricities of John the Baptist - his reclusive lifestyle, his handmade clothing, his foraged diet, his short temper. The synoptic gospels build up the tradition of John the Baptist as an undomesticated, confrontational, even self-destructive prophet. So it should catch our attention that in the fourth Gospel there is no description of the baptizer's origins in the wilderness or his volcanic temper. We only read a transcript of his questioning by the religious experts of the day, which doesn't provide the color or depth of character we're used to but does offer some insight into his motivations.

"Who are you?" the priests ask of him. "I am not the Messiah," he replies. "Well then who *are* you?" they insist. "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness," he sighs. So you're not the Messiah and you're not one of the great Jewish prophets. "Why then have you been baptizing people when you have no authority to do so." The Fourth Gospel doesn't say much more about John the Baptist, but we know from the more interesting accounts of his life that he was beheaded.

III

It's a pretty dramatic contrast, actually, if you imagine it - the priests of the synagogue wearing their clerical vestments and the Levites in their custom fitted robes questioning this frumpy unshowered preacher. It's not a fair fight. They're punching down. He's charged with exercising spiritual authority that he does not have, but what makes their questioning absurd is that he's convicted of using authority that he does not claim. He precedes Jesus, he heralds Jesus, he points to Jesus but he is not Jesus. This whole charade is intended to chasten and degrade a prophet who could not be more humble. "There is one coming after me who is greater than me," John the Baptist says. "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals." He says only that he has come to prepare the way, to make straight the path, to welcome the one who is God's salvation.

In other words, John the Baptist knows that you don't have to be the Messiah to make yourself useful. Jesus is the savior, not John. But Jesus isn't present. John is. And all these priests and Levites are. Are we not empowered to do saving things until the greater savior comes? John speaks in the tradition of Isaiah who said, "the spirit of the Lord is upon me." Isaiah who said, "The Lord has anointed me." Isaiah who said "He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted." John the Baptist does not presume to be the Messiah. Yet in his humility, still he knows he is carrying God's word. How could he neglect his responsibility to share the Good News that God has sent?

IV

This is another case in which the Bible uses ironic humor to make a laughingstock of the prissy clergy. They think they're something, don't they? Their titles and their degrees and their collars and their robes all stiffen them up against the new movement of the Holy Spirit. But anyone who reads the Bible knows it's a little too easy to make fun of religious professionals. We see similar sins in other walks of life. In Paul Farmer's book about Ebola, I learned about a class of colonial public health professionals sent from Britain and France to contain diseases that threatened the economies of their empires. He blames much of the healthcare problems in West Africa today on these "experts" who often used racist and ineffective means to control the spread of disease rather than care for the people who became sick. Mostly from Britain and France, they were "Pastuerians" after the French father of microbiology, Louis Pastuer. When I first heard that job title I thought it must be a joke. These "pastuerians" were powerful, they were revered, but they were not always in touch with their mission to deliver care. They had the authority to heal but they used it to serve their own purposes.

In the Isaiahan tradition of John the Baptizer, spiritual authority is not a robe that you put on but grace that you receive. It's not a title that you earn but a commitment that you make. It's not the role that you have but the person that you are. I don't think it's hard to notice John the Baptist among us today. His spirit is in anyone who uses what authority they have to do the work that needs to be done.

It's often the case that those in power are not anointed with God's authority. Was it the president or the governor who first told us to wear face masks? In some instances, it wasn't even the local doctor who told us to change our behavior. In the tradition of Isaiah, you can't tell who is anointed with the spirit of the Lord by how they dress. Or by how they speak. Or by who they work for.

John the Baptist is everyone who has looked around and asked, Who, me? Am I the right person to do this? Does this need to be done now? Isn't there someone more capable than me to do what needs to be done? Yes, there is another. But I am here now. Yes, one may do this better later. But it's best that we start now with what we have. You don't have to be the Messiah for God to use you. You don't have to be Jesus for God to anoint you. If you take John the Baptist as an

example and read how he's portrayed in the synoptics, you don't even have to be attractive or at all likable for God to use you.

So, tell the clerics to stop hiding behind their robes. Tell the doctors to be worthy of their white coats. Let every true prophet stagger half naked out of the woods and baptize us with holy water. This is the work to which we have been called, these are the people who have been anointed. There is surely one greater, so we will prepare the way. Christ Jesus is coming, and we shall make straight the path. The spirit of the Lord is upon us of all people - to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim God's favor on the oppressed.