

Ha! No camel's hair outfit (he gives an "I caught you" look)<sup>1</sup> And no long, stringy hair. I gave up that look when Hollywood started copying it for their Tarzan movies. Hey, my clothes were cheap, and easy to dry, I baptized a few hundred people a day. Truthfully, camel hair doesn't smell so good when it is wet. And...scratchy! Don't wear it if you don't have to.

Probably you're also expecting me to show up as an angry, arm-waving, screaming Old Testament Prophet. You've maybe never thought about me being a pleasant, quiet, persuasive person. Do you really think so many people would have come to see me if I had been unpleasant to be around? Just the opposite. In fact, Dr. Luke described me as exhorting people and preaching the good news to them.<sup>2</sup> Does that describe a raving maniac, or somebody pleasant to be around?

Consider this: Much of what you know about me is only found in the *Gospel of John*. John was very sensitive to the fact that I was doing the best I could to be a harbinger of the Good News. What kind of person would God have chosen to precede the Prince of Peace?

But I didn't come here today to talk about my fashion preferences and personality traits, I'm here to talk about my cousin and good friend, Jesus. You might remember that he and I became acquainted while I was still in Elizabeth's womb, and he in Mary's. I jumped for joy whenever Mary walked in the room. My mother got tired of that after a while, so she tried to stay in the same room with Mary as much as possible.

Jesus and I were not only cousins, we were good friends growing up, even though we lived in different villages. Our older relatives often remarked that I was more like his ancestor David, while he was more like my ancestor, Aaron. I loved to be in the wilderness and outdoors, while Jesus preferred to study the Scriptures. I communed with God in nature, while he preferred to be with God in the synagogue or in his father's workshop. I would challenge him to come with me to hunt for wild bees and honey, and he would challenge me to come with him to spend time in his father's house. When he said that, I was never sure whether he meant Joseph's house or the synagogue.

Although I was born into the priestly line of Aaron on both of my parents' sides, it was pretty clear from a young age that I was not going to be a traditional Jewish priest. My father and

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:4

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:18

other community leaders made sure that I got training in the traditional Jewish teachings, but that did not exactly excite me because it didn't appear to me that the Jewish leaders were practicing what they were preaching. They did follow the letter of the laws, but did they really love God? or follow the *intent* of the laws? They were much more intent on following the hundreds of rules they had invented to build guardrails around the laws. Those guardrails turned out to be prison bars.

Who did excite me were the Essenes who lived near the Dead Sea and in other small communities. The Essenes were a Jewish sect who lived very strict lives of following both the letter and intent of the laws of Moses. They typically lived in desert communities and had very stringent rules on living. Above all, they practiced repentance in a way that God had commanded. They lived lives of poverty and practiced baptism by immersion, and shared some interesting messianic beliefs. Though the Bible doesn't refer to them, they were the third most numerous Jewish sect after the Pharisees and Sadducees. Qumran was a community of Essenes, and was the place where the Dead Sea scrolls would be found in the 1940's.

Unlike Jesus, I didn't make a conscious decision about entering the ministry. I simply lived in the wilderness or near the Jordan River, and talked to people who happened to come by. I noticed that most of the people who came by knew that they were living by rules, not by love. Many had what would later be called "guilt complexes."

One day, I was visiting with a Pharisee who was on his way to Jericho from Jerusalem. A real basket case, if you know what I mean. The Holy Spirit urged me to offer him a better life. So, I said, "If you are willing to change your life and start living with love for God and your fellow Jews, I will help you do so." He begged me to help him, so I led him to a nearby pool of water and baptized him for repentance. When he came out of the water, he was crying with happiness and relief. He knew his life had changed forever.

Now that guy was a real loudmouth. He started telling everybody what had happened to him. It turns out that a lot of people were just like him. Pretty soon there was a steady stream of people from all directions who wanted to repent and be baptized. Pretty simple job for me, actually. Tell them to do what they already knew to do, tell them to be nice and love each other and God, and repent of their sins. Rather than fulfill the rules of the religious leaders, I wanted them to exceed those rules by acting in love.

After people agreed to do what I exhorted them to do, I would immerse them in the water. It was a great gig, and there were only two people who ever caused me a problem.

The first of those was Jesus. Both of us knew that he didn't need to repent, since he had always loved God and followed his commandments. Nonetheless, when he asked to be baptized by me, I relented and baptized him. When he came out of the water, the craziest thing happened. The Holy Spirit appeared like a dove and descended upon him. Out of the sky came a thunderous voice that said, "This is my Son, whom I love, and with him I am well pleased." I

didn't think it possible that Jesus could be more holy, but from that day forward, he was overtly filled with the Holy Spirit.

It was at that very moment that the Holy Spirit also enlightened me about my future role. He told me that my whole life had been designed to prepare the way for Jesus. That he would become more and more, while I would become less and less. He pointed out that I was like the long looked-for messenger that our beloved prophet Malachi had pointed out.<sup>3</sup> I was to finish preparing the way for the Lord, and then my job was finished.

With your elected politicians and your interstate highways and paved roads, you have no way to comprehend what the Spirit meant when he said "prepare the way." In my day, kings had the power of life and death over all of their subjects. Any subject that displeased or inconvenienced him was subject to death. So, when a king traveled, it was common for the roads upon which he would travel to be prepared. The roads would be leveled, straightened, and decorated to make the trip easier, faster, and more pleasant.

That was my job. To prepare the hearts of the people to hear the message of Jesus and be ready to follow him. I did such a good job that many of my own followers left me to go be his disciples, which I encouraged them to do.

Before I tell you about the only other person I had difficulty with, I must tell you a little history that people of my time would have known intimately. Herod the Great was the king of Israel from about 37 BC to the time of Christ. He built the Temple Mount and Caesarea, and was fabulously wealthy. He was also the Herod that killed the babies of Bethlehem at the time Jesus was born. Unfortunately, Herod the Great became more and more insane as he grew older. He died a few years after the birth of Jesus.

Upon Herod the Great's death, the Romans split his kingdom among four of his descendants. Herod Archelaus became ethnarch of the tetrarchy of Judea, Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, and Philip became tetrarch of territories east of the Jordan. A daughter, Salome the First, was given other territories.

Philip and Salome the First do not really figure into the story of Jesus very much, except that Philip had an ex-wife named Herodias. Herod Archelaus only lived until 18 AD, and then his territory was turned into the Roman province of Judaea, which included both Jerusalem and Caesarea.

Which brings me back to Herod Antipas, the man who hated me. Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee, the area west of the Sea of Galilee. He married Herodias, the ex-wife of his brother, Philip. I was very critical of that and demanded that he repent of such a sin, and his many other sins. Herod Antipas put me in prison, and so added to his sins. Dr. Luke is the only gospel writer

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<sup>3</sup> Malachi 3:1

who explains why I was in prison.<sup>4</sup> You can imagine that my criticisms stung Herodias, Philip's ex-wife, Philip the brother of Herod Antipas, it's a total soap opera. Anyway, Herodias could barely wait for her revenge.

While in prison, I became despondent because I didn't know what would happen to me or to my disciples. I was hoping all of them would go to Jesus, but I kept hearing reports about him that were mystifying. So, I sent some of my disciples to ask him. They came back with the strangest report, which was strangely reassuring. When they arrived, Jesus barely paid any attention to them. Then, he turned to them and just said, "Go tell John what you have seen. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised. And, the good news is proclaimed to the poor."<sup>5</sup> I knew from this cryptic message that my work was complete. I had prepared the way for the Messiah, and he had come.

Soon thereafter, Herod Antipas had a big party where he had too much to drink. He rashly promised his daughter anything she wanted. Her mother, none other than Herodias, asked for my head. Which Herod Antipas promptly gave her...on a platter. So, my career came to an abrupt halt. But that wasn't the end of Herod Antipas.

Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee during the entire ministry of Jesus. He greatly feared the popularity of Jesus, even to the point of thinking Jesus might be a resurrected me. I think Jesus planned many of his travels so that his disciples would not be in danger from Antipas. In the end, it was Herod Antipas that Jesus was sent to by Pilate, since Jesus had come from the area of Galilee.

Now, I'm not saying that having my head served on a platter was a good thing, but it did smooth the transition for the disciples from my ministry to that of Jesus. Right? I prepared the way for him, then got out of the way. I completely fulfilled the purpose that God had for me. Maybe that is why Jesus gave me such a high compliment by saying, "Among those born of women there is no one greater than John."<sup>6</sup>

But, I envy you, because Jesus continued with, "yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." I got to see the kingdom of God as it first came near, in itchy camel-hair outfits no less, but you in your comfy clothes, you get to be a part of the kingdom as it is fully known.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:19-20

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11:4-5 paraphrased

<sup>6</sup> Luke 7:28