

*But Instead We Got Jesus*

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Matthew 3:1-17

<sup>1</sup>In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup>This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup>Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup>But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup>Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup>“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” <sup>15</sup>But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. <sup>16</sup>And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

## I.

After John's sermon, Jesus might have seemed a bit underwhelming. Jesus waits in line, standing on the muddy shore of the Jordan, one among many. If Matthew hadn't told you he was there, you might not have seen him at all. But John, he burns bright. John's sermon stands out for its fiery eloquence. John looks like a prophet; that's the point of him wearing clothing made of camel's hair, the leather belt, and peculiar diet of honey and wild locusts. Jesus is supposed to be the star of Matthew's narrative. You'd expect a grand entrance, but not here. Our narrator says that, "Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him."

Very matter fact.

Compare how Matthew introduces John: John *appears* in the wilderness . . . where did he come from? It's almost as if materializes out of pre-creational mist, out of decayed leaf, bones, and hair, and nothing. It's almost like he's creation, eating honey and insects. Jesus doesn't appear; Jesus walks in from a nearby village, Galilee . . . he doesn't have an interesting diet; he doesn't stand out for his attire. He's got no sermons, at least not yet. He's kind of meh.

He was born to a couple of immigrants. They were insufficiently documented, according to Matthew's account.

Somewhere in one of George Orwell's essays, he speaks of the sameness of the poor, everywhere, hard to tell from the very earth, beneath your feet. If you've seen one child laborer, do you remember anything unique about her? Or just the vacant eyes?

So perhaps Jesus.

He just doesn't seem to have that stature. He's not what we were looking for. Or at least, he's not what John was looking for. He's not playing the part prescribed. And John asks the embarrassing question: "If you are who I think you are, why do you come to me for baptism? If you are who I think you are, you should be baptizing me!"

## II.

We came here, perhaps to hear thunder, or at least the sound of melodious waves crashing against a craggy cliffside of our creaturely life.

We came here to be moved by a building that soars; but the Jesus we see in Matthew doesn't seem to bring peace, or be particularly friendly (he's not working the crowd). More than that, Jesus is waiting in line, waiting . . .

We came here to go higher, but with Jesus, we seem to get in line, with everyone else, waiting our turn.

Someone caught Bill Gates on video waiting in line for a hamburger at a fast-food joint. It was a mini sensation seeing a billionaire wait in line. Bill Gates, looking like the rest of us. But in Matthew, Jesus is the rest of us, and maybe even the least of us. Jesus never bought a car, never got

a degree, never was successful in business, never wrote a book, never got tenure, never got the good citizen award . . .

We imagine, perhaps, that if Jesus is the real thing, what we're seeing, Jesus standing on a muddy shore, listening to someone else preach, that it's pure theater. He's going to shed this normal person thing and become Amazing Jesus. It's a story we know, the person who works in the cubicle next door, a worker bee from 9-to-5, but a superhero when he puts on his superman outfit.

But Jesus seems almost as helpless as we feel, when we're stuck in line. Remember the last line you were in? The security line at the airport? And waiting? Or waiting for the test results? Days and people vanish into the grey. Only the line, the drudgery of waiting. Do you ever feel yourself becoming less human? 'Tis the season, right? We want to be delivered from the line, from the waiting, so we check our Facebook "Likes"; upload a picture showing us happy, healthy, and not immodestly wealthy. We stay busy, or are just busy bodies, attempting to ignore the fact that all our busyness will not save us, will not redeem us.

Meanwhile, Jesus waits. Eventually, perhaps, we notice Jesus. . . .

### III.

Maybe at some level, we're as surprised as John is at Jesus' way of being. We don't get the Jesus that we may have expected. Jesus doesn't stride onto the world stage. He doesn't demand power to do the good; he doesn't demand power. If a child is nearby, Jesus says, "That's where I want to be, with the children!"

He joins people who are in and out of recovery, *mostly out of recovery*, and feels like, "Yeah, I get you." Jesus spends most of his life on foot, walking rather than riding a chariot (he never rides a chariot). And then, when he does ride into Jerusalem, it's a bit silly looking, riding on a donkey, or as Matthew has it, astride two donkeys. Jesus is funny, too. He praises the disciples when, so often, they *didn't see* him when they thought their waiting was a sign of his absence — "for when I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink; when I was a stranger, you welcomed me, I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison, and you visited me."

And the disciples were like, "What? When did we see you hungry, sick, a stranger, or in prison? When were you in the line outside the soup kitchen? When were you wearing prison clothes? We didn't see you. . . ."

John stands out because he sees Jesus but perhaps not all of Jesus — and he senses that. Maybe John's brilliance as a preacher is that he knew that the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins was important, but he also knows that's it not all the gospel. He knows there's more to Jesus than meets the eye.

And if that is so for Jesus, could it also be true for us too? That there is more to our waiting than meets the eye?

## IV.

We are not in church waiting to live life, preparing to live life. All life waits. Waits for its redemption. Groans for its wholeness. According to Joey Jeter, people of faith know that life with so much waiting is not nothing, but something bittersweet and beautiful.

I will tell you where I think I have glimpsed bittersweet and beautiful. It's a Baltimore thing. It's a thing in the desert, where nothing is supposed to grow. It's a thing that no one imagines possible, not in their wildest dreams. But you see it. It's a Baltimore thing.

And I didn't really understand it, until this weekend, when a womanist theologian quoted from Alice Walker, where she writes, "hard times require serious dancing." You've seen it, too, if you've lived in Baltimore for any length of time.

You've seen it. You've seen him or her. A person who lives his life, mostly on foot, always on foot, making his way down Charles, or Pennsylvania Avenue, head down, beaten down, nearly down. But then a car with its windows rolled down pulls alongside, and the music beats and rumbles out, and then, this person, almost like magic, starts dancing, out of nowhere, but very much somewhere, someone, as if to say, somehow, I'm not defeated if I can still dance; I believe I will rise again, though my body is bent, though my spirit is tired, but I believe will sing again, I will sing with my body hat the world is about to turn, and I'm going to dance, dance, just to encourage it along, while we wait. . . . You see it in Baltimore, if you've lived here for any length of time, in this world God so loves, something like waiting in life, bittersweet and beautiful.

May it be so for each of us. Amen.