

Sarah Kretzmann
January 12, 2013

John was last in a long line of prophets. Beginning way back with Abraham, God spoke to his people through prophets. These were men and women who served as messengers for God, calling God's people to repent and turn away from their wicked ways, to provide consolation in times of despair, and to offer hope for the coming Messiah.

So then when Jesus shows up on the scene, the age of prophets draws to a close...the Messiah is finally here, the one whom God's people have waited for for generations and generations, the one the prophets have promised, the one who would come to offering healing and forgiveness and salvation.

Now, we should say that John was a good last prophet. You could say the age of prophets closed on a high note with him. He looked the part—with the uncut hair and the unshaven face and the camel's hair jacket with

the leather belt. He acted the part—with the eating of the locusts and wild honey and the defiant behavior towards King Herod. He spoke the part—with the fiery sermons and the threats of hell. Yes, John was a dramatic final act.

In the Bible, we mostly find John by the Jordan River, where the people from Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside would come out to be baptized by him. John's baptism is a prophet's baptism, not to be confused with Jesus' baptism. John's baptism is one of repentance—meaning that a person comes to John, confesses his or her sins, and then that person kneels in the river and John baptizes them, telling them they'd better change their ways or else they're headed straight to hell. That's John's job—to call people to task and to convict them of their sinful ways and scare them into leading ethically and morally better lives.

Some people today think this is the preacher's task, to speak with a prophetic voice, to call Christians on the carpet, to scare the hell into them not out of them, to threaten them with fire and brimstone as if the power of God could be used like special effects for a high school play. But that is not the job of the Lutheran preacher. That is the job of the prophet, and we now know that that job ended with John. The age of prophets is over, as the author of Hebrews so beautifully reminds us, "Long ago, God spoke to us by the prophets, but now in these last days, he has spoken to us by a Son."

Jesus is not a prophet. Muslims believe this. Jews believe this. Christians do not. Jesus is not a prophet; he is the one the prophets pointed to. His message is different. His message is one of assurance not threats. His baptism is different. His baptism is about forgiveness not fear. And Jesus shows us this in his own baptism.

When Jesus comes to the Jordan River and encounters John, John might have tried to hand the prophetic apron over to Jesus. John might have said, “Ok, Jesus, here’s how you do it....stand right here, say these scary things, pray these prayers, threaten them with fires of hell and then send them on their merry way. Got it? Good, I’m outta here.” But John does not move over so that Jesus can stand in his footsteps. John remains standing. But Jesus kneels.

And this is mind-blowing...that Jesus doesn’t come as Hotshot Prophet, terrifying people with eternal damnation and the wrath of God. He could easily do this, since he alone holds the keys to God’s kingdom of heaven, since God’s creative power is contained in his very words, since he is the beginning and end of all things. But Jesus doesn’t come brandishing his power and authority over the crowds, making them tremble and cower in fear. He doesn’t stand with the prophets. Instead he kneels with the sinners.

He takes the position of the weak one, the broken one, the afraid one.

He kneels in the water and waits for John to baptize him, as John tries to convince him it should be the other way around. “No, you should baptize me,” John says, “after all, you are the one with all the power here.”

We’ve heard this before, another time when Jesus kneels, to the utter shock of all who are present....Peter says this when Jesus kneels in front of his disciples and takes the towel and the basin to wash their feet. “No,” Peter says awkwardly, “I should wash your feet...after all, you’re the one with all the power here.”

And that’s the wonder of Jesus’ baptism and the miracle of his presence on this earth, that although he could and probably should take hold of the power that is at his feet, he instead kneels in the muddy water and bows his head, kneels in submission and take the towel...kneels with us in the muck of life.

And if Jesus can set aside his power to kneel beside us in the waters of baptism, we, too, should be glad to do this to one another, laying aside threats and judgment and instead assuming a posture of humility and submission to one another, which is exactly what Jesus calls us to do, but more importantly in submission to Christ, who humbles himself to the point of dying precisely for the ones that he could lord his power over in judgment, but doesn't.