

*“Greater than John the Baptist!”*

While Margaret and I were in Austin, celebrating our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary last Sunday, we went to a Zach Theatre production of *A Christmas Carol*. In the Director’s Notes, Dave Steakley, wrote, “About ten years ago I got the idea to develop a musical version of *A Christmas Carol*, inspired by Baz Luhrmann’s film *Moulin Rouge*.” Steakley continued, “In that film, which is set in 1900 in Paris, music by rock artists like Sting, Labelle, Elton John, Nirvana, and Madonna was rearranged to tell the romantic story of a struggling writer and a Parisian courtesan – it felt fun, fresh and invigorating.” Steakley went on to explain, “I liked the anachronistic blend of a turn-of-the century story told through music from multiple genres and eras because it helped me hear familiar pop and rock songs **“in a new light and its youthful energy made me connect to the story in a way which made it vital and aesthetically exciting.”**”

Later in the Director’s Notes, Steakley shared, “The parable of Scrooge is a good reminder for all of us to spend our time wisely, to be good and generous stewards of our community, to celebrate the love in our family or family of choice, and rejoice in second chances to begin anew with the conviction of our heart leading the way.”

I greatly enjoyed that remarkable musical version of the Scrooge parable! I realized, as I witnessed the presentation, how many folks have been so influenced by the pharisaic interpretation of the Christian message that most people have difficulty comprehending the positive and liberating Good News reported in the Gospel of John. Following the legalism of early Jewish Christians, today’s Pharisee types either reject the Gospel of John because it is not like the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke or they have undermined the Gospel of John by interpreting it, as if it were, intended to be understood as strict, restrictive dogma.

On the other hand, Steakley’s treatment of *A Christmas Carol* suggests to me the Gospel of John is also a radical revealing – not of *A Christmas Carol* but of Jesus’ identity and his message of Good News! For example, today’s Reading from John demonstrates greater insight into the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus, than what was shown by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John’s gospel also provides more evidence of Jesus’ purpose and identity. Further, in a similar fashion, Matthew’s account of the visit with the Christ Child by the “Magi”, is also quite different than the typical way the Synoptic Gospels describe Jesus, his life, and his purpose. **Let’s consider how the Gospel of John and the story of the strange visitors from the east help us receive the identity of Jesus, as Steakley wrote, “in a new light” through which “its youthful energy” enables us to “connect to the story in a way which” makes “it vital and aesthetically exciting.”**

One might even say “new light” repeatedly radiates from the Epiphany Reading in Matthew. It is especially rare in the Gospel of Matthew for someone other than a Jew to fulfill God’s purpose, yet this same gospel reported how a group of star studiers followed a star – having interpreted that it was announcing the Birth of the King of the Jews. Such activities are denounced in the Law of the Old Testament but Matthew still includes the story! “New light” comes through the appearance of the star, the announcements of its meaning, the leading of the “Magi” from Jerusalem by *“the same star”*, and God’s message of warning to them in a dream – telling them to *“not go back to Herod”*. That first Epiphany brought the revelation of the “new light” shown in the Incarnation of God in the Son of God – or as the Gospel of John declared in **Chapter 1, verse 15, “The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father’s Only Son.”**

An important reason for “new light” coming to us through the Reading from the Gospel of John is the greater depth, detail, and context provided by its reports on the role of John the Baptist in the revealing of the true and fuller identity of Jesus. In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John also demonstrates Jesus was interacting with John the Baptist for several additional days around the day of his Baptism. This is significantly different from the Synoptic Gospels, which say Jesus went off to his temptation immediately after his Baptism. The Synoptics were not written by eyewitnesses, so it is understandable that they failed to be aware of this extra time Jesus spent around the Baptizer following his Baptism.

Although the Gospel of Luke indicates Jesus and John the Baptist were cousins, very little is shared about the Baptizer’s struggles and his insight into the full nature of Jesus. We are given a hint about John the Baptist’s thoughts relative to the Baptism of Jesus in **Matthew 3:14, “But John tried to make him change his mind. ‘I ought to be baptized by you,’ John said, ‘and yet you have come to me!’”** The Baptist was reluctant to baptize Jesus because he recognized his inferiority to his cousin but it did not come as surprise, since Matthew previously reported John referred to the coming Christ or Messiah, saying in **Matthew 3:11b, “He is much greater than I am; and I am not good enough even to carry his sandals.”** Strangely enough, when messengers from the Pharisees came to question the Baptist, he said in **John 1:26, “I baptize with water, but among you stands the one you do not know. He is coming after me, but I am not good enough even to untie his sandals.”**

Our Text from the Gospel of John went on to report that the next day John saw Jesus coming to him and the Baptizer told some of his disciples in **verses 29-31**, ***“There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” “This is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘A man is coming after me, but he is greater than I am, because he existed before I was born.’”*** That testimony validated the claims of the Gospel’s author, who wrote in the Prologue, ***“The Word”*** existed with God from before Creation and was the agent of the Creator’s activities. Although the Baptist was Jesus’ cousin, he went on to declare, ***“I did not know who he would be, but I came baptizing with water in order to make him known to the people of Israel.”***

The Synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke report Jesus’ Baptism came along with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him but only the Gospel of John actually gave the Baptist’s account of that experience. It is found in **verses 32-34**, ***“I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven and stay on him. I still did not know that he was the one, but God, Who sent me to baptize with water, had said to me, ‘You will see the Spirit come down and stay on a man; he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’”*** Therefore, the Baptist claimed God has said Jesus is the Baptizer with the Holy Spirit!

The difference between the reports of the Gospel of John and the Synoptics are also significant because John’s version portrays the Baptizer making several declarations about Jesus’ identity to some of his disciples. John even went forth to make the following, most powerful and conclusive declaration about Jesus’ identity. ***“I have seen it and I tell you that he is the Son of God.”*** Wow, what “new light” was shed by those words! The authors of the Synoptic Gospels, evidently weren’t aware the Baptizer made that testimony to his disciples, otherwise, they would certainly have been expected to have shared that information. The sources for the Synoptics must not have included any of the former disciples of John the Baptist, who heard him give that testimony. Yet, the Gospel of John clearly was written by an eyewitness, who was one of those former disciples of the Baptizer.

The purpose of those announcements by the Baptist was, in part, to encourage at least two of John’s specific followers to become disciples of Jesus. One of them was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter and, according to the Gospel of Luke, a partner in fishing with John and James, the sons of Zebedee. Since we know one of those two former disciples of the Baptizer was Andrew and not Simon, then it is a very real possibility the second one was either James or John, the sons of Zebedee. Although John, the son of Zebedee, was the youngest of the original twelve Disciples of Jesus, he was clearly, along with Peter, one of the two most prominent Disciples following the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Since the ***“beloved disciple”*** – the nickname the author of the Gospel of John gave himself – was given responsibility for Jesus’ mother by Jesus when he was dying on the cross, that designation would have raised John’s prestige and authority among the other original Disciples. I am inclined to believe John, the son of Zebedee, is the author of the Gospel of John.

After John the Baptist’s two disciples went with Jesus, Andrew – one of them sought out his brother. The gospel states in **verse 41**, ***“At once he found his brother Simon and told him, ‘We have found the Messiah.’ (This word means ‘Christ.’)”*** Verse 42 says, ***“Then he took Simon to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘Your name is Simon son of John, but you will be called Cephas.’ (This is the same as Peter and means ‘a rock.’)”*** The Synoptic Gospels do not report this naming of Simon until much later in Jesus’ public ministry.

Matthew’s amazing account of the visit to Jesus by the Star Studiers and John’s report of the words and actions of the Baptizer both reveal Jesus’ identity as God With Us – the Incarnation of God in Human Form. Remember, John the Baptist said Jesus is the ***“Lamb of God”, “Son of God”, and “the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit”***.

Dave Steakley wrote the parable of Scrooge “is a good reminder for all of us to spend our time wisely, to be good and generous stewards of our community, to celebrate the love in our family or family of choice, and rejoice in second chances to begin anew with the conviction of our heart leading the way.” The same might be said to be the response we are to give to the messages about Jesus’ Identity in our Readings from Matthew and the Gospel of John. Because of this Truth, you and I are called to follow Andrew’s example of bringing others – his brother in particular to meet Jesus Christ! **Who will you introduce to the “new light” of “the Word” in human form – who will you rejoice with about the “second chances to begin anew” which God gave us because “The Word became a human being”?** Amen.