

“John and Jesus: The Buddy System”
Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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The Jordan River flows south some 200 mostly blue, mostly bucolic miles from its source in Syria to its depressing destination at the Dead Sea, 1300 feet below sea level. In fact, the word “Jordan” derives from a Hebrew word meaning “flowing downward” or “descender”. Near the midpoint of its travels, the Jordan’s twisting, snake-like path through the countryside of ancient Palestine carries it into, and then out of, the Sea of Galilee. In Biblical times, it was the only large, flowing body of water in the territory, as it is now.

So, it is not surprising that Jesus met up with John at the Jordan River. In their era, the Jordan River, because of its history, was central to the cultural and spiritual life of the population. The biblical record in the Old Testament includes, for example, in the Book of Genesis, Jacob’s battle with the angel on the bank of the Jabbok, which is one of the lesser tributaries of the Jordan. And it includes, in the Book of Deuteronomy, the Israelites crossing the Jordan into “the land of milk and honey”, after Moses’s death.

No, it is not surprising that Jesus met up with John at the Jordan River. What is surprising, is that it was their first and their only personal encounter, even though they were cousins. Jesus grew up in the lush hills of Galilee. John grew up a world away in an Essene settlement of desert-like Judea. As youngsters in religiously devout families, they may well have been on pilgrimages to Jerusalem at the same time, but there is no report in the New Testament that the two experienced direct, personal exchange until Jesus approached John down by the riverside. Yet that encounter was inarguably

definitive in the life of Christ, as evidenced by the fact that it is described in some measure in each of the four Gospels. And the account of Jesus's baptism has been inarguably definitive since in the legacy of Christ, as evidenced by the plethora of hymns, songs, and poems it has inspired in the lore of the Church, and the centrality of baptism in the rites of the Church. No other event occurs in the New Testament directly relating to the Jordan River.

No, it is not surprising that Jesus met up with John at the Jordan River, though they had no direct acquaintance before. And given John's pending execution, they would not be in one another's presence again. One might think of their sole encounter as the manifestation of the original Christian "buddy system" ordained by God: John and Jesus. Today's lectionary selection stimulates reflection on "John and Jesus: The Buddy System".

I suggest that the term "buddy system" implies that two buddies understand one another, look out for one another, protect one another, defend one another, and can count on one another.

The theme of John the Baptist was repentance—the basic aspect of one's relation to God, as preached by the prophets before him. Repentance does not signify being sorry in a religious mood. More accurately, repentance is a fundamental reorientation of the way one thinks about the world, effecting a change of direction in one's life. John appealed to a populace wary and weary of Roman oppression. He represented a new order of righteousness, interpreted by the Romans as defiance of their rule. The more that people flocked to him, the more he was seen as a public threat. The rebellious nemesis of Roman rulers knew, however, that which Jesus knew. John knew that the

authorities should be less worried about him than about the carpenter walking toward him on the slope down to the Jordan shore.

One might think of it as the manifestation of the original Christian “buddy system” ordained by God: John and Jesus.

The more he was misunderstood as the Messiah himself, the better John grasped that he was but the instrument by which God’s plan would be implemented. Remember the exchange between these buddies:

John: *“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”*

Jesus: *“Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness”.*

Only then did John consent. Only then did the heavens open up:

“You are my own dear Son, I am pleased with you!”

Thereafter, Power and Wealth and Superiority and Selfishness and Injustice and Hate learned that the nemesis John the Baptist was quite right: They should be less worried about him than about the carpenter walking toward him on the slope down to the Jordan shore. The carpenter, who commenced to preach love, compassion, and forgiveness while John was imprisoned, later had his buddy’s back: *“I tell you, among those born of women, no one is greater than John.” (Luke 7:28)*

One might think of it as the manifestation of the original Christian “buddy system” ordained by God: John and Jesus. Understanding one another—looking out for one another—protecting one another—defending one another—counting on one another.

A missionary named Kallie Skaife, working with refugees in Greece, reports what happened to an Iranian man identified as “M”:

In 2003, everything M knew was destroyed by an earthquake. Consumed by the question of why something like this would happen, he went to live with relatives in Afghanistan. There he married and had a daughter, but he was still filled with despair. He ended up in Athens with other relatives, all of whom were Muslims. He was drawn to Christianity by the crosses mounted on the Orthodox churches dotting the city. Though it was forbidden by his relatives, M started reading the Bible by flashlight at night, after his uncles were asleep. He gradually felt the call to declare his faith, and be born again.

One Sunday, M planned to rise early to read his Bible and pray, because on that day he was to be baptized with other Iranian believers. But a cousin had discovered the plan, and before M's alarm went off, the cousin poured boiled water on M as he slept. (Cousins come in different types) Both of M's thighs and one arm were scalded.

M went to the baptism anyway. Standing before the gathering, the burn on his arm clearly visible, he declared: "No matter what they do to me, I will love Jesus."

One might think of it as a contemporary manifestation of the original Christian "buddy system" ordained by God: John and Jesus.

"M" and Jesus: Buddies.

Understanding one another—looking out for one another—protecting one another—defending one another—counting on one another.

Me and Jesus: Buddies.

Understanding one another—looking out for one another—protecting one another—defending one another—counting on one another.

You and Jesus: Buddies.

Understanding one another—looking out for one another—protecting one another—defending one another—counting on one another.