

Partner's Circle E-News

November 2014



Photo by Clancy Dunigan, 2014.

What Does it Mean that Jesus “Apprenticed” with John the Baptist?

By Ched Myers

Note: This is an abbreviated and edited version of comments given to the Latino/a Hermeneutics Section of the Society of Biblical Literature last month.

With the start of the new Christian liturgical year we begin the Year B lectionary cycle. The gospel reading for this Sunday, Second Advent, features John the Baptist (Mk 1:1-8). Mark eschews any kind of birth narrative of Jesus, choosing instead to jump right into the story by invoking Isaiah words of wilderness prophecy (1:2-3; see the O.T. reading for Sunday), followed by the introduction of John (1:4-8). By focusing *first* on the Baptist, Mark seems to be emphasizing the importance of Jesus’ subsequent apprenticeship to this feral figure. Unfortunately, later Christian Christological tradition has played down the significance of Jesus’ baptism (and presumed mentorship) by John, to the point of disappearing it altogether, a theological suppression that has served to depoliticize the gospel narrative.

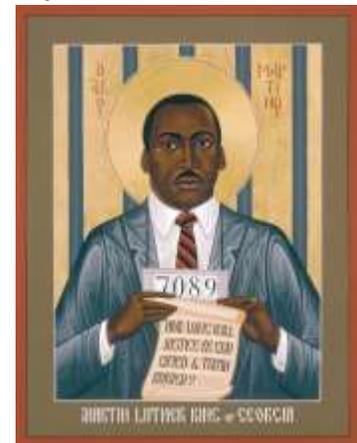


Why did Jesus choose *this* wilderness prophet to apprentice to? John is portrayed by Mark as someone who has “rewilded,” subsisting on the margins of society by foraging from the land (1:6). He invites his people into the sacred waters of the Jordan for renewal—far from the domesticated ritual baths of Judea’s cities and villages. Of course John’s costume—camel hair skins—invokes the memory of the great Elijah (2 Kg 1:8). But that story lacked “closure”: Elijah was raptured into heaven at the Jordan River (2 Kg 2:6-14). Moreover, Malachi later promised that Yahweh would send the AWOL prophet back to Israel “before the great and terrible day of the Lord” in order to turn the people around (Mal 4:5f). So Mark thus opens his story by presenting John-as-Elijah *at the Jordan*, exhorting the people to repent. This *prophetic* genealogy is far

more important to Jesus’ identity than the kinship lines invoked by Matthew and Luke in their birth narratives.

Elijah challenged kings (I Kg 18-19), and so did the Baptist. The Jewish historian Josephus, a contemporary of Mark, explains that Herod Antipas, one of the successors to the dictator Herod the Great, executed John for stirring up a popular insurrection. So Mark reports that Jesus’ public ministry begins “after John is arrested by Herod” (1:14), a stark fact he later fleshes out in a flashback story (6:14-30), explaining that John was imprisoned because of public criticism of Herod’s political alliances through marriage. Jesus’ ministry in Mark thus *begins* with his fateful choice to publicly identify with a notorious dissident, whose days are numbered because of his vocation of speaking truth to power. This not only makes the Nazarene complicit in John’s rebel movement, but also connotes a “passing of the torch” in a prophetic revival. Throughout the rest of his story, Mark virtually conflates Jesus’ vocation with both John’s (6:14-16; 8:28; 9:11-13; 11:30-32) and Elijah’s (9:4; 15:35f).

So what does this mean? A contemporary analogy can help our imagination. Mark wrote 40-50 years after the executions of both John and Jesus. While the first century world of Roman occupied Palestine seems remote to North American Christians, the world of Memphis, TN in April of 1968 is not. We too live less than 50 years after Martin Luther King was assassinated, in what we now know was a government conspiracy to silence his prophetic voice—exactly one year after King’s public excoriation of U.S. foreign policy in his “Beyond Vietnam” speech at Riverside church in New York. What might it mean for us to be disciples of *that* Dr. King—not the domesticated saint of the national holiday? Few today dare speak as unequivocally as did King about racism, poverty and militarism, despite the fact that our government is, as in 1968, again mired in foreign military interventions while unwilling to restructure an economic system that guarantees widening social disparity. I believe that for us, apprenticing to a Kingian version of prophetic faith helps recover the political meaning of Jesus’ alignment with John the Baptist (*right, icon by Robert Lentz, 1984*).

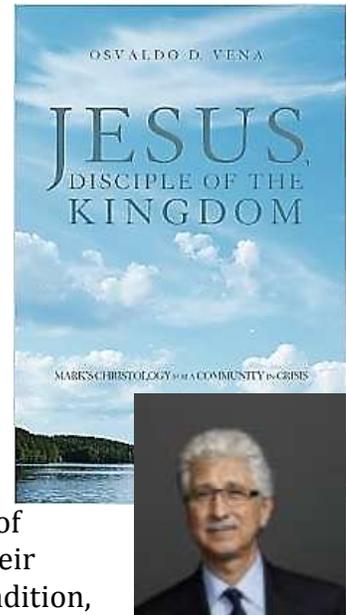


Mark further introduces Jesus as hailing “from Nazareth in Galilee” (1:9), emphasizing *these* origins throughout his story (1:24; 10:47; 14:67; 16:6). This village was obscure (Nazareth is otherwise unattested in ancient literature); but it lay a mere three miles southwest of Sepphoris, the fortress and administrative center of Herod the Great in Lower Galilee. After Herod's death in 4 BCE, a major Judean insurrection broke out, which included the sacking of the royal armory at Sepphoris by rebels (see Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17:271 and *Wars*, 2:56). In retaliation, the Roman legate Varus razed the city and enslaved its inhabitants.

Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, moved shortly thereafter “to impose Roman Style order” on the region by rebuilding Sepphoris, repopulating it with loyal functionaries and workers, and renaming it *Autocratoris*—literally... “belonging to the Emperor.” If Jesus of Nazareth labored as a construction worker in Nazareth, it is highly likely that he got work as a young man rebuilding Sepphoris, just an hour's walk away.* Such a scenario is all too familiar to workers in Iraq or Afghanistan, the Philippines or Columbia today, who are forced to build the infrastructure of foreign military occupation in their own country. The destruction and reconstruction of Sepphoris would surely have had a profound impact on Jesus consciousness as a bitter catechism in imperial realities.

I had the opportunity this year to write the Foreword for Dr. Osvaldo Vena's new book, *Jesus, Disciple of the Kingdom: Mark's Christology for a Community in Crisis* (Wipf & Stock, 2014; right). Vena explores the idea that Mark's Jesus was *himself* also a disciple—of God. He rightly points out that the discipleship of Mark's Jesus *begins* with the strategic and consequential choice to apprentice with the Elijah-like prophet John. And when the Baptist is silenced by Antipas, Jesus takes up his message and begins building a movement of discipleship among disenfranchised peasant fisherman (1:14-20).

Mark's prologue portrays the world of Roman-occupied Palestine in political, social, economic and religious crisis. Historically we know that in this context, tensions stemming from imperial forces of domination and “globalization” gave rise to prophets who called their people to radical change. John took his cue from the wilderness tradition, and Jesus from John. If we are to be followers of *that* Jesus, we must also make choices in the conflicted terrain of our world about what prophetic traditions *we* apprentice to and what social movements of liberation we help build as individuals and as church. However controversial or consequential such choices may be, such is what it means to be a disciple of the Great Disciple of God's Kingdom.



* In Mk 6:3, the hometown crowd at Nazareth wonders: “Is this not the carpenter...?” The Greek *tektōn* can mean skilled or unskilled construction worker. Perhaps the first modern theologian to see the importance of Jesus' upbringing in the shadow of Sepphoris was the African American mystic Howard Thurman, the great mentor to M.L. King. In his 1949 *Jesus and the Disinherited* he writes: “It is utterly fantastic to assume that Jesus grew to manhood untouched by the surging currents of the common life that made up the climate of Palestine” (p. 18). For more on this, see John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2007, 108ff).

Airey Report: A Roll Through the Watershed

by Tom Airey

All we have to do is start paying attention. -- Ched Myers

On the last Thursday of October, an overcast fifty degree afternoon, I took a four-hour excursion on bike, exploring the Detroit River Watershed. This was recreation. But more: a spiritual discipline. I was unplugged and tuned in. I wanted to keep an eye out for what it was that Creator God had to tell me about this city through the Lens of the Land.



The Detroit River herself flows under the Ambassador Bridge, privately owned by billionaire Matty Moroun. This week, the city announced they were breaking ground on yet another bridge to support the massive flow of trade and traffic across the river to Canada. The city is saturated with seagulls, who thrive anywhere there is water and food, especially left behind by the human species (*left, with the Ambassador Bridge in background*).

Speaking of billionaires, Mike Ilitch made his money on Little Caesar's Pizza and he owns the city's baseball and hockey teams. The hockey team plays at Joe Louis Arena, named after the greatest boxer of all-time, who grew up in the watershed. The Arena is going to be replaced by a new rink on land that Ilitch purchased from the city for \$1. In addition, with the *hopes* of creating 8,300 jobs, the bankrupt city *somehow* contributed more than \$280 million *without* a community benefits agreement that would guarantee employment of *actual* Detroiters (on previous bike rides from downtown through the massive construction along the Cass Corridor, I saw a multitude of white folks working--curious in a city with an 83% African-American population). Ask Detroiters about the hope of robust job creation and they will unequivocally tell you the Lions have a better chance of winning the Super Bowl. Joe Louis will be demolished in 2017, the riverfront land signed over to one of the creditors involved in loaning billions to the city which defaulted during the historic bankruptcy. As I peer into the future, I can clearly see hotels and condos on this prime real estate.



As I headed east, I cruised past a portion of Hantz Farms, the land-hoard of another wealthy "investor." According to *Businessweek*:

John Hantz, the chief executive officer of a billion-dollar investment group in the Detroit suburbs, says he is pouring tens of millions of dollars of his own money into the project because he believes private enterprise can solve urban America's problems more effectively than can the public sector.

It doesn't have to be this way. Two years ago, Malik Yakini of The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network described a "community-based urban agriculture movement" in an op-ed in the *Michigan Citizen*:

Many of us have opposed those proposals [of John Hantz] because we think that their scale is inappropriate and because they are not grounded in the social justice values that guide the current community-based urban agriculture movement... From our perspective, having a large amount of land in the hands of any one person or corporation continues the centuries old legacy of inequity. We want to see the publicly owned land in the city of Detroit utilized for the common good. Land ownership provides the opportunity for wealth creation, community development and pride.

While Hantz Farms is committed to growing trees to make land more scarce (in order to reduce blight and drive up property values), Myrtle & Wayne Curtis (*right*) are cultivating a completely different kind of consciousness at Freedom Freedom Farms, on the eastern fringe of city limits.

When I rolled up, I caught them bundling kale to sell to the local Jungle Juice bar a half-mile away. Wayne explained that, for the past five years, Freedom Freedom had been experimenting with growing food through a process of "permaculture," an "indigenous" life way committed to interdependency, efficiency and accessibility for *all* species. This is juxtaposed with an "official" policy defined by coercion, enforcement & scarcity.

"Come on, Wayne!" He was just starting to gather steam when Myrtle beckoned for him to haul over the bulging tray of greens to get hosed down by water, in this watershed, controlled by legislature, not Nature. Myrtle lamented that, just down the street, she spotted a neighbor desperately siphoning it from a nearby fire hydrant. In the words and work of Myrtle & Wayne, I heard the lament of Dr. King whispered in my ear:

We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

On my way over to Jungle Juice, I passed one of seven blockades (a "farmer's market stand" right in the middle of a major street running west to east from Detroit into the suburbs) along Altar Street, commissioned by the city of Gross Pointe. At the very least, this is a painful reminder of this watershed's half century of white flight.

Three months ago, the former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich investigated this watershed's water issues. He reported:

Had the official boundary been drawn differently to encompass both Oakland County and Detroit – creating, say, a "Greater Detroit" – Oakland's more affluent citizens would have some responsibility to address Detroit's problems, and Detroit would likely have enough money to pay all its bills and provide its residents with adequate public services. But because Detroit's boundary surrounds only the poor inner city, those inside it have to deal with their



compounded problems themselves. The whiter and more affluent suburbs (and the banks that serve them) are off the hook. Any hint they should take some responsibility has invited righteous indignation. "Now, all of a sudden, they're having problems and they want to give part of the responsibility to the suburbs?" scoffs L. Brooks Paterson, the Oakland County executive. "They're not gonna' talk me into being the good guy. 'Pick up your share?' Ha ha."

Buried within the bankruptcy of Detroit is a fundamental political and moral question: Who are "we," and what are our obligations to one another? What if resources were shared equally across the watershed, just as they had been for millennia before the white man started drawing artificial boundaries?

There's plenty of rewilding in this watershed. Trees and shrubs are growing where burned out and/or vacant homes used to be planted. Mother Nature is determined to have the final word. And she will. As Wendell Berry wrote: "Whether we and our politicians know it or not, Nature is party to all our deals and decisions, and she has more votes, a longer memory, and a sterner sense of justice than we do." This time of year, the Fall colors transcend the Crayon box, and native Spruce tower over homes.



On the Eastside, just a stone's throw from the shore of the river, the European colonial legacy is enshrined in stone. Father Gabriel Richard has a mixed legacy: he advocated strongly for the War of 1812, but also had an amicable relationship with the native population, so much so that Tecumseh refused to fight with the British until they released Father Gabriel from captivity.



In order to understand how decisions are made in the Detroit River Watershed, all we need to do is follow the money. This is a land controlled by corporations with no allegiance other than profit. Ilitch and Hantz (and Quicken Loans' Dan Gilbert and a handful of others) are lobbying and lawyering up, as the Republican Governor and Legislature have appointed an Emergency Manager over the city and school district. From as far back as 1701, the degrading of Detroit has been steered by rich white folks. According to Scott Martelle in *Detroit: A Biography* (2012), a few basic factors have led to Detroit's rusting demise: "divestment and abandonment propelled by corporate decisions framed and aided by government policies, from housing to free trade, with an overlay of stubbornly persistent racism."

Watershed Discipleship interrogates us: Who will lobby for the Land? Who will protect the Poor? Who will boycott businesses that have zero interest in a full investment of this place? As Reich reminds us, this vocation will require a concerted effort from across both the chocolate city and the vanilla suburbs. His piercing question bears repeating: "Who are 'we,' and what are our obligations to one another?"



BCM Programs and Resources

Remember to check the new Detroit-based blog at <http://radicaldiscipleship.net>, featuring a new post every day telling a story of the Movement. Make it a daily habit!

Our **next BCM webinar is Tuesday, December 9th**: “The Story of Spiritus Christi: Myra Brown, Mary Ramerman and Jim Callan.” Ched will interview these three priests about the journey of their amazing “holey, roamin’ catholic” parish in Rochester, NY. Please note the special start time of 4.45 pm PST (an hour earlier than usual). Register [here](#).



Missed our recent **Webinars**? You can purchase archived versions, including our most recent programs at www.chedmyers.org/webinar-archives:

- **Nov:** “Celebrating Thomas Merton’s Peace Retreat of 1964” with Gordon Oyer.
- **Oct:** “Native Justice Movements & the Canadian TRC” with Bishop Mark MacDonald.
- **Sept:** “The Life and Legacy of Dr. Vincent Harding.”
- **Aug:** “A Visit with Jeff Dietrich of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker” (free).

Check out the feature article in **Christian Century** about our watershed discipleship work: www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-10/watershed-disciples#.VEbxqSZysmY.facebook.

Register NOW for the Bartimaeus Kinsler Institute!
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www.bcm-net.org/2015KinslerInstitute



News from the Circle

by Ched Myers

November kept us busy readying and recruiting for the February Institute, prepping for and attending the Society for Biblical Literature in San Diego, and planting a winter garden and cover crop after our (mostly) fallow year.

Elaine lead a three day workshop in Saskatoon, SK based on her Doctor of Ministry research on intergenerational trauma and settler Mennonite-Indigenous relations in the Canadian



prairies. Twenty-five Mennonite leaders from Saskatchewan and Manitoba participated and two Native leaders served as witnesses. Elaine was very grateful for the serious engagement of her research hypothesis, and continues to receive enthusiastic feedback on her work. She is now writing a feature article for *Canadian Mennonite* outlining her research that will be published in early January. (Left: With her ministry team at Mennonite Central Committee SK.)

Visitors this month included our old East L.A. neighbor **Franky Arechiga** (right), who I worked with on a grad school application; **Sheri Hostetler** and **Joanna Shenk** from **First Mennonite San Francisco**; and new Mennonite friend and neighbor **Sofia Samatar** and family (Sofia, right, is an award-winning sci-fi novelist and professor at **Cal State Univ. Channel Islands**). Our monthly rhythms of weekly yoga and monthly webinars, Taize, Bible study and house church gatherings continue. We've also been traveling to Orange County to help my mom figure out new rhythms at her retirement community.



Highlights at SBL included responding to **Bill McKibben** on a panel on the Bible and Climate Change; reviewing **Oswaldo Vena's** new book on Mark (see lead article above), seeing lots of old friends; and hanging out afterward with contextual Bible study guru **Gerald West** (left) of the **Ujemaa Center in South Africa**.



Like all of you, we've been paying close attention to the meaning of events in Ferguson, MO. For a broader picture, we commend the Facebook page **[Breaking the Silence Against Modern Day Lynching](#)** curated by our friend **Ruby Sales** (pictured left at a Nov 12th demonstration in DC with our mentor **Liz McAlister**).



We wish you all a deep and renewing Advent season.