What Kind of Story Is This?

Matthew 11:2–11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matt 11:2–3)

"All sorrows can be borne," the Danish writer Isak Dinesan once said, "if you put them into a story."[1] I wonder if John the Baptist, the grizzled forerunner of Jesus, would agree. *Are* all sorrows bearable? *Can* all human griefs find redemption in stories?

Consider this example: a faithless king forsakes his own wife to marry his brother's. When a truth-telling prophet condemns the dishonorable marriage, the king's new wife seethes, and the king—ignoring his own conscience—imprisons the prophet. Soon afterwards, the king throws himself a birthday party, gets drunk, and invites his stepdaughter to dance for his guests. Her performance "pleases" him so much that he promises her anything she desires, even up to half of his kingdom. The girl (spurred on by her mother) demands the imprisoned prophet's death. Unwilling to lose face in front of his guests, the king reluctantly keeps his promise. Before the birthday party is over, the girl receives the prophet's head on a platter.

This is a story. Is it a bearable one?

Here's its prelude: One day, an angel of God appears to an elderly priest who is serving in the temple. The angel promises the priest and his long-barren wife a son, a special child who will become a messenger for the Messiah. Though the stunned priest doubts the angel's message, a baby boy arrives nine months later, and everyone who hears of his birth rejoices, wondering what the miraculous child will become.

With the sky-high expectations of his community ringing in his ears, the boy grows up, becomes a prophet, and takes to the wilderness. Eager to fulfill his vocation, he calls everyone he meets—even the king of the

1. Dinesan, quoted in Mohn, "Talk with Isak Dinesen."

land—to repentance, faithfulness, and justice. He prepares the way of the Lord, baptizes the Messiah with his own hands, and eagerly announces the arrival of God's kingdom.

But then? Then he lands in prison for speaking truth to power; suffers doubt and despair about the Messiah he staked his life on; experiences no dramatic rescue *from* that Messiah; and loses his life to appease a clueless girl, a cruel-hearted queen, and a cowardly king.

How's *that* for a bearable story?

To ponder John the Baptist's place in the arc of the Gospels is to ponder the "good news" of Jesus from a deeply complicated place. Christians are often trained to slap redemptive meaning on tragedies. "Nothing happens in this world unless God wills it," is one of the stories I grew up with. "The Lord never gives anyone more than they can bear," is another. "God has a plan," is still another, and so is, "For everything, there is a season. A time to be born and a time to die."

If we Christians have a unidirectional way of telling our conversion stories ("I journeyed from shadow to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from despair to joy"), then John's story should stop us in our tracks, because it is an *anti-conversion* story. By our stock logic, John's journey is a backwards one. From certitude to doubt. From boldness to hesitation. From knowing to unknowing.

What should we do with this disturbing trajectory? Should we call it a case of spiritual failure? Faithlessness? Backsliding? The fact is, most of the pious stories I've inherited as a Christian are not jagged enough for the locust-eating prophet who struggles with doubt and dies in prison. They're far too tepid and polite. Where is the Christian story that can handle horror? Where is the Christian story that will sit in the deepest shadows and testify that God is alive there, too?

What bothers me most about John the Baptist's story is its utter senselessness. John suffers at the whim of a thoughtless teenager. He languishes because of other people's moral cowardice. He dies for a dance.

In other words, John is one of those people—we all know them—who does everything right and suffers anyway. He dies disillusioned, unsure of his Messiah, and as far as we know, his death saves no one. As Teresa of Avila purportedly told God, "Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few!"[2]

I suppose if we try hard enough, we'll find a way to pummel John's story into something bearable. But is that what we're called to do? What if instead, "the point" of John's story is to prepare us for the way of Jesus, which is a

2. Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa*, 548.

costly way? A narrow way? A risky way? What if the Gospels give us John's story so that we can ready ourselves for the Messiah who is coming—a Messiah who will indict all forms of transactional religion that promises comfort, prosperity, and blessing in exchange for our professions of faith? Maybe salvation isn't about immunity, however much it offends our sensibilities to admit it. Maybe the point is that we don't need to slap meaning on every human experience in order to prove that we are pious and God is good. Maybe some things are just plain horrible. Period.

It's tempting to read a story like John the Baptist's and tell ourselves that it's anachronistic, that it comes from a rougher, cruder, more barbaric time. But the opposite is true. We still live in a world where infidelity and betrayal are accepted norms. We still live in a world where the innocent are detained, imprisoned, tormented, and killed. We still live in a world of sudden and random violence. We still live in a world where young girls fall prey to powerful men. We still live in a world where speaking truth to power is a radical and sometimes lethal act.

Closer to home, I still live in a world where I distance myself from people who tell me truths I'd rather not hear. I still live in a world where I worry more about sounding foolish or losing face than I do about practicing discretion, admitting my mistakes, and humbling myself in front of people I'm desperate to impress. I still live in a world where people within my reach live lonely lives and die meaningless deaths—and I barely notice.

Maybe what I cherish about John's story is his utter honesty in the face of pain. He doesn't hold back; he voices his doubt in all of its terrifying fullness: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Luke 7:19). In other words: "Lord, I've staked my entire life on you. Has it all been for nothing?"

Jesus doesn't chastise John for his honesty. Instead, he responds to his cousin's pained question with composure, gentleness, and calm. "Go and tell John what you hear and see," Jesus tells the disciples who bring him the prophet's question. Tell him that "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Luke 7:22).

In other words, Jesus says: go back to John and tell him your *stories*. Tell him what your eyes have seen and your ears have heard. Tell him what only the stories—quiet, scattered, and questionable as they are—will reveal.

Why? Because Jesus is not a pronouncement. He is not a sermon, a slogan, or a billboard. He is far more elusive, mysterious, and impossible-to-pin-down than we can imagine. He emerges in the lives of the plain, poor, ordinary people all around us. We glimpse him in shadows. We hear

him in whispers. He comes to us by stealth, with subtlety, over long, layered stretches of time.

What version of Jesus would emerge if we gave our stories of doubt and disillusionment their due? How much divine richness have we squandered by mistaking certainty for faith?

According to Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus hears of John's death, "he leaves in a boat to a remote area to be alone" (Matt 14:13). He doesn't preach. He doesn't turn the horror of his cousin's story into a morality tale. He doesn't numb himself to his loss by plunging straight back into ministry.

Instead, he withdraws. He lingers over his pain and creates space for it to spend itself. And then? Then he feeds people. The story of the feeding of the five thousand directly follows the story of John's death. Jesus returns from mourning, asks a crowd to sit down, gathers whatever scraps of nourishment he can find, and multiplies the scraps into a feast for all.

The platitudes of religion notwithstanding, some things are too terrible for words. Some hurts can't be salvaged with a story. To hold silence in the face of the world's horrors is a holy response, one that creates space for mystery, meaninglessness, and grief. It's right to mourn freely when the unbearable descends upon us. It's enough to feed the people around us with whatever we have at our disposal. Somehow, in the generous economy of God, our scraps will be enough, even if we can't explain how or why.

The story isn't what we thought it was going to be; John's haunting question from a jail cell testifies to this dissonance. But the Messiah still feeds us and calls us to feed others in return. In the asking, feeding, and listening, we make our sorrows bearable.