

When John discerned a call to be a lone voice crying in the wilderness, to turn his back on family, forgo marriage and the legacy of children, to give up the dream of a more secure and perhaps lucrative occupation, one that would end in retirement and at least the luxury of appreciation, did he entertain doubts? Did he wonder if this call to a life of separation, confrontation, conflict, and reproach was real, true, worth the sacrifices required?

Maybe John imagined the call, maybe it made him feel needed, special, better than, more important than the Temple priests, smugly wrapped in linen robes, eating the choicest cuts of the finest grass fed lamb, and watching their 403(b)'s mature.

Perhaps his bold conviction and fiery rhetoric, his peculiar diet and hair shirt, were masks, attempts to suppress insecurity, suspicion of self-deception, melancholy—the noon day demon of desert dwellers. Whatever the case, John now sits in Herod's prison, his certainty about Jesus cracking, wondering if his faith was misplaced.

What John expected was not what John got. Now, when it is too late, John wonders aloud if his call was real, true, or if he gave his life in service of an illusion. What John gave his life for, now required his life from him. Whatever end we pursue with our lives, be it belly dancer or brain surgeon, consumes the life entrusted to us.

Time, something freely given to each of us, something we all have in equal measure while we are alive, costs us nothing except in the spending. We can spend our time building buildings, creating communities, growing crops, raising humans, educating minds, healing broken hearts, caring for the sick, entertaining the bored, conducting business. However, we spend the time, cost is measured in return on investment.

What are the signs your time was not spent in vain? A student expressing appreciation for helping her to discover the joys of learning? A Chamber of Commerce plaque for bringing new business to your community? Creation of a public garden that feeds both body and soul? A shelter for the homeless? A sanctuary for those threatened by violence? A bundt cake to die for—no small thing? A partner holding you close as life ebbs away?

Years ago, Harold Robinson, retired Episcopal Bishop of Western New York, told a story of a bike tour he and his wife took through the English countryside. They kept finding the most curious signs. One said simply, “This is a sign.” That was all. Another read: “Do not move this sign.”

These signs are comical because they serve no purpose. A sign is meant to point beyond itself, or it has no meaning at all. But knowing how to read signs, assuming they point to something, can be notoriously difficult.

John wants to know if he has lived and is now dying in vain. What Jesus gives him are signs: 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. Oh, and one more thing John: “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

I hear John say, “I’ve sacrificed everything, including my life, for you and your cause, for the coming judgment on the oppressive, idolatrous power of Caesar, for the advent of a new age of justice and peace, and all you care about is a social welfare program!?”

We do not know how John responded, how he interpreted these signs. The next time we see John, his head is served as the last course at Herod’s birthday party, the prize more cherished than half of Herod’s kingdom, the award for the seductive dance of a sixteen year old girl more interested in pleasing her mother than in securing her future.

Surely, a sign of John’s power to infuriate the morally corrupt but does it point to anything more? Is losing his head only one more sign that *might makes right*? As the executioner’s ax falls on John’s neck, does he recall his fiery rhetoric about the ax lying at the root of the trees that fail to produce good fruit?

I wonder if John knew, if his disciples heard and told him, of Jesus’ assessment of his life: John was the greatest person ever born of woman, yet less than everyone else in the kingdom of heaven—less than the blind, the deaf, the lame, the lepers, the poor, less even than the dead? If he did know, even if he could make sense of such an assessment, did it provide him any comfort? Did he take no offense?

The difference between what we expect of God and what we get, the difference between what we expect of ourselves and what we live, the difference between what we expect of others and what we see, these differences are signs, signs of our illusions.

We can take offense or we can be disillusioned. To be offended is to be imprisoned by our expectations; to be disillusioned is to know the advent of the real, the true, which is the hope of our salvation.