
Jesus and John, Christmas and Competition

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Christmas Eve – Year A

Before there was Tech versus Georgia. Before there was Alabama against Auburn, or South Carolina versus Clemson, Morehouse versus Howard, Army-Navy – before those old and storied rivalries, there has always been competition.

Oh, no! Competition around Christmas time? Competing for best present given or received? Best Christmas displays? Best Christmas foods and wines? Surely not! And what about all those end-of-the-year top ten lists? The ten best movies of the year, the ten best books. Ha! Maybe competition is at its most vigorous around Christmas time.

Still, tonight, it is a delight to remember all who are here to welcome the birth of Jesus! There are shepherds and wise men, cattle and donkeys. There are Joseph and Mary. There is the rest of Jesus' family and cousins.

Wait. Wait a second. There is someone not here. There is one member of the baby Jesus' family who does not seem to be here, not joining the celebration. I don't mean any possible brothers and sisters, who would not have been born yet. I mean his cousin. The older cousin of Jesus.

You know who I mean. I mean John the Baptist, six months older than Jesus. Like the older brother of the prodigal son, John the Baptist is not at the birthday celebration, the Christmas celebration. (Maybe you have someone in your life who is not here either.)

Yes, Jesus is the holy incarnation of God. We honor his birth tonight. But let us also remember that Jesus was also born into a wider human family. He was born into a group of relationships, a system. Jesus offers us new life tonight by giving us a glimpse into how holiness operates in relationships.

Relationships are wonderful and beautiful! But they are also, inevitably, the sources of competition. We seem to have been born into competition, especially those of us growing up in a family of siblings or close cousins. The philosopher, René Girard, has taught us that competition, and how we live with those who want the same thing as we do, is part of what forms our identities.

Let us pause tonight, maybe like Mary paused to treasure these words and ponder them in her heart. Let us pause this most holy night, to consider the human competitive relationship that Jesus himself was born into. There is one, especially important, character in the Jesus birth story, John the Baptist, who teaches us a lot about how to live with competition.

In the Holy Bible itself, some of the most critical and life-changing events occur around moments of competition. Consider the first brothers, Cain and Abel, competing for God's favor in their individual sacrifices. Consider Esau and Jacob, both wanting their father's blessing. Consider Mary and Martha, two very different sisters. Consider the prodigal son's older brother, complaining that he was getting less attention than his brother.

And consider this fellow who shows up every year right before Christmas, John the Baptist. Just as college football season is closing and many yearly rivalries are being settled, John the Baptist shows up. He shows up in order to teach us something about competition.

It is evident from certain scriptures that the prophet John the Baptist, was in competition. Who was his rival? (Remember what is always the right answer to every Sunday School question?) Well, it was Jesus! John the Baptist was an early competitor with Jesus.

All four of the gospel writers knew something about this. John the Baptist is the only character who shows up in the opening chapters of each of the four gospels. Not Joseph, not the shepherds, not the magi, not even Mary. If we review those ways in which John the Baptist is mentioned, we might just learn something about competition in these weeks before Christmas. It seems that, before Jesus came around, the role of “leading prophet and teacher,” and maybe even the role of “messiah,” belonged to John the Baptist.

It was to John the Baptist that people were flocking out from Jerusalem, out at the Jordan River. And before Jesus had disciples, John the Baptist had them. In fact, it looks like the first disciples of Jesus were originally disciples of John the Baptist. When they saw Jesus, it seems they switched teams in the middle of the season!

Even after Jesus had begun his ministry, John the Baptist continued his own baptizing and preaching; and John the Baptist still had disciples. Apparently, one day some of John’s disciples came to John and said, “Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him” (John 3:26). Yes, John’s disciples were complaining because more people were going to Jesus than to John. The polls show! More people are now flocking to Jesus! What should we do?

Then, finally, in all his eccentricity, in all his strange dress and inflammatory words, John the Baptist tells his team, “I am not the one. I am not the Messiah.” His words should be a constant reminder for anyone these days, for anyone who receives adulation and attention from people. No matter how much attention you get, remember the words of John the Baptist, “I am not the Messiah. And you are not the Messiah.”

John the Baptist will say even more about his competitor. Confiding to his own attentive and adoring disciples, he says, “Jesus must increase, but I must decrease.” He is the light, not me. This is the reason we keep the Feast of Christmas near the winter solstice when the days are at their shortest. As Jesus is born into the world, days begin to grow longer, and light increases in the world. The Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist, however, is kept on June 24, near the summer solstice, exactly half a year before Christmas, because the days begin to get shorter after that; light decreases. (This is also why the Gospel of Luke has John the Baptist’s mother getting pregnant six months before the pregnancy of her relative, Mary.) Jesus must increase, but I must decrease.

It must have been hard for John the Baptist to defer to someone else. But look at that honorable dance that both John and Jesus perform, when Jesus came out to be baptized by John. “I should be baptized by you,” said John. “No,” said Jesus, “I am to be baptized by you, John.” They defer to each other.

Their mutual behavior is exactly the sort of thing we need during this season. Yes, this is the season when we are thrust into family gatherings again. This is the season when we replay the same old competition tapes. Why am I competing with my sister again this year? I thought we were over that.

We are never over it.

The behavior of John the Baptist teaches us this season, “I am not the Messiah. I want to think that the world revolves around me, that the party will not begin until I show up, that my present will be the finest, that my project will bring in the most money for the firm this year. But, I am not the Messiah.”

Yes, John the Baptist and Jesus were close. Scripture identifies them as cousins. They were probably friends. But they were also competitors. Sometimes, our closest competitors are also our closest friends. They may even be our brothers and sisters. This is why Jesus will say, later, about John: “Among those born of women, there is no one greater than John the Baptist.”

Ultimately, the word “compete” means to “strive with” another person, not against them. The word is not “Contra-pete,” to “strive against.” The word is “com-pete,” “to strive with.” We strive with other people for good skill and for good football. And also for good government, for good families, for the common good.

Yes, our competitors are often the very people we have the most in common with. Common blood, common family ties, common jobs, common hopes. Sometimes, our husbands or wives are our closest competitors! Tech and Georgia. Tennessee and Vanderbilt, Duke and North Carolina. Army and Navy. Wow, maybe even Republican and Democrat. We share our very lives together with them. True competitors are really our true colleagues. The great witness of John the Baptist and Jesus is to show us how to live with competition. How to strive with each other for the common kingdom of God. By deferring to each other. By honoring each other. By loving each other.

To celebrate the birth of Jesus, then, means worshipping the greatest, and not having to compete for who is the greatest. Neither you, nor I, need to compete for being the greatest. It's a freeing celebration: "Hey, I am not the greatest. I am not the greatest. I am not the Messiah." We are free now, to strive together, to work and to rejoice together, in making Christ known to the world.

AMEN.

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