

Isaiah 40: 1 – 11  
Acts 13: 14b – 26  
Luke 1: 57 – 80  
Feast of St. John the Baptist

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### **On Being a Holy Sidekick**

I want to read you a list of names and I want you to think about what each name has in common. Sancho Panza, Dr. Watson, Tonto, Kato, Donkey, Robin, Samwise Gamgee, Mr. Spock, Chewbacca, Hermione, Nora Charles, Beezus, and Mary Magdalene. Any ideas?

They are all sidekicks or second bananas. Each is linked to a more famous and powerful individual who is better known, has a greater reputation, and is understood to be more important. The term sidekick is taken from the slang of pickpockets. A kick was a safe pocket not easily picked. Thus, a sidekick became a close companion – a safe alternative. The term second banana comes from vaudeville days. One famous joke always ended with the lead comic getting a banana. Thus, the second lead became known as the second banana.

Our patronal saint, the one whose feast day we celebrate this Sunday is a biblical second banana, a sidekick, as it were, to Jesus of Nazareth. He is the one who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord. He was the advance man proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel in anticipation of the arrival of the Messiah. He was to go before the Lord to prepare his ways. He is not the Lord and, in the end, must decrease so that the Messiah can increase.

It is not easy to be a prophet. It is a bad career move generally. No one would want their child to grow up to be a prophet. It is lonely work, poorly paid, and generally ends in an unpleasant and early death. In the case of John the Baptist it also involves ugly clothes and weird food. But being a prophet and a second banana must be even worse. One suffers equally but gets less respect or admiration. One is the warm-up, not the main act.

Consider John the Baptist. His birth is marked by the typical biblical impossibilities. An elderly barren woman gives birth, against all odds, to a son. The disbelieving father is struck speechless throughout this pregnancy. A cousin, equally with child in a mysterious way, shows up and there is recognition of one unborn by the older unborn during the pregnancy. The child is named oddly and the whole story is the stuff of gossip and wonder. This odd child goes out to the wilderness, never a good idea, and begins to preach repentance to the people and practices water purification rites as part of this ministry. He draws crowds and followers. Some think he might be the long-promised Messiah. He, against his better judgement, baptizes a young man from Nazareth called Jesus and odd things seem to happen. Finally, John takes on the client king of the Jews, Herod Antipas, for his sinful marriage and his many wrong-doings as leader. He is arrested and executed for speaking truth to power. It all ends in disaster except that Jesus of Nazareth begins his public ministry in Galilee, doing deeds of great power to the amazement of many.

What sense might we make of this short but dramatic life? How might we understand this precursor of the Messiah, the one who claimed he was not fit to tie the thong of the Messiah's sandal? Is John the Baptist just a second banana, the holy sidekick of Jesus?

And, if so, what does that mean for us as followers of Jesus? Are we third and fourth bananas for our Lord and Savior?

Part of our challenge lies in our culture. We are mostly interested in being number one. We like winners, not losers. Our heroes, after suitable but tolerable suffering, triumph totally. The lesser folk get sacrificed along the way but we are, as a culture, entranced by the lone hero, standing tall and winning out. But we forget the importance of sidekicks, of second bananas because we underestimate the power of relationships. Relationships matter in this world of ours. Relationships are at the core of all creation. God created all that is and ever will be for relationships. They are a central element of all creation, of all life.

Consider Samwise Gamgee. Frodo almost failed in his quest multiple times. In the end, it was the sturdy ordinary power of Samwise that got the job done. Without Samwise, the Ring of Power would not have been destroyed. Every hero needs a sidekick. Every hero needs a relationship of trust and caring. Every hero is made better and stronger and wiser and kinder for having a sidekick. It is why Jesus wants to be baptized by John. It is why John breaks trail for Jesus, setting up the ministries that are to come. It is why Jesus honors John by taking on the dangerous work started by John, knowing exactly what happened to his sidekick. And John's death at the hands of the Jewish leader presages the death of Jesus at the hands of the Romans.

Relationship matter to ordinary folks, too. It is not just heroes who need sidekicks. We all need people in our lives who know us well and like us anyway. We all need the other. We need someone to hold us to our own values when we grow weary and cross. We need a mirror to show us who we are becoming. We need communities of faith to support us when our own faith is challenged or weakens. We need to draw strength from others and to give strength to others. We need to be heroes for some and sidekicks for others. We are not either or; we are both and.

Few of us will be asked to be prophets. Few of us will face the kind of stark challenge faced by John the Baptist. Our moments of being a sidekick are likely small moments. But they are, nonetheless, critical to the working out of all creation. Each of us has a part to play in the unfolding of the world. The old adage that there are no small parts, but there are small actors is powerful and true. None of those characters I named were the leads of their stories. They were not meant to be heroes in the traditional, classic sense of heroic action figures. But without them, there would have been no heroes at all. I cannot imagine a Frodo without Samwise Gamgee or Don Quixote without Sancho Panza or Harry Potter without Hermione or Sherlock Holmes without Dr. Watson. For heroes are lost without sidekicks and sidekicks would be lost without heroes.

In so many ways, our baptismal covenant really calls us to be sidekicks rather than heroes. Remember our responses to our baptismal calls to action – "I will with God's help." That is the cry of the holy sidekick. We cannot do this work alone and we must not do this work alone. We are called to relationship with the Divine One; we are called to be God's holy sidekicks. The road ahead is unknown; the way uncertain; the future unclear. But we start out, in company with others, trusting that the tender mercy of God, the dawn from on high, will be the light to guide our feet into the way of peace, truth, and eternal life. We will with God's help. Amen.