Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



A church window depicts Christ's baptism by John the Baptist at the Jordan River. (CNS/Crosiers)



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> John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying … "I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Matthew 3:1,11)

Click on internet links for John the Baptist and you may find:

- a wild looking, scruffy guy, or
- a muscular movie-star handsome fellow, or
- the semi-starved ascetic as depicted in metal sculpture, or
- a rather ordinary man pouring water over the head of Jesus as they stand in a river, or …

Where is John the Baptist in your imagination? Is he standing by the Jordan River, out in a desert or locked in a cell in a palace basement? Who was he to you back then? Wild, hostile, compassionate, deeply prayerful, condemnatory, an energetic teacher with his disciples, a gentle confessor to those who came to be baptized by him? Any, all, none of these?

I've spent time with John over the years. I've stood in awe before the tapestry painting in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles and have sat in prayer with a photo of it many times. I've imagined and "listened" to the conversations John and Jesus might have had before and after the baptism. I've sat beside John in his cell pondering his life as he wonders whether he correctly understood his calling, whether he has done enough, whether he *coulda/woulda/shoulda* done things differently. And what his fate will be. I've been there listening to him even as I asked those same questions about myself.

My time with John occurs in my imagination, of course, but I have found that the veil between my world and his is quite thin. A few months ago, two friends each shared with me that a friend who had recently died appeared and spoke to them on the night they died. In their mind's eye, so to speak? Yes. Was it *really* the person who had just died? Was it an authentic visit from beyond death? Yes, they said; oh, yes.

I understand. My mother died while I was miles away. Her kidneys had failed; her body was so heavy with the extra fluid. She appeared to me, beautiful and energetic, saying, "Oh, look, Fran, I'm dancing! I'm dancing!" She had left dancing behind when she married my zero-sense-of-rhythm dad, and we never talked about

her dancing. Was that *really* my mother? Was it really the message she would have wanted to give me? Yes, I could never ever have imagined those words. They were the most comforting gift she could ever have given me. That thin veil between us had parted for that special moment.

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The time I have spent with John over the years has somehow shaped who I have become. As I sat with him at the Jordan, I experienced him as passionate, so committed to calling people to live their covenant with the Holy One of Israel; to care for the least, i.e., the widows, orphans, non-Jewish immigrants, the hungry and ill of his country. As I sat with a group of followers at the end of another day, I found him an eager teacher who listened carefully to questions and concerns of others. When I stood at the edge of a crowd of curious city onlookers, I understood his outsized anger — and felt less judgmental about my own.

The longest time I spent with John was years ago when riding a train with college students heading for Mexico City as part of an immersion experience. Sitting in my own quiet spot on the train, I sat with John in his basement prison cell in King Herod's opulent palace. Historically John's cell was likely a filthy place, yet when with John, I was in a clean, quiet, prayerful place. I even had a hay bale to sit on to keep possible critters away from me! I don't remember him speaking to/with me. What I remember is his pacing as he prayed, calm, trusting that the God he had come to know and follow was still walking with him.

That was John's gift to me those many years ago; it remains a precious gift today. Was his presence with me as real, as authentic as my mother's? No, no way. And yet … and yet, somehow a friendship was formed and remains.

Holy One,

Thank you for John,

The one we call the Baptist.

He still speaks to us ,

Calling us to prepare a way for you in our own time;
To tell the truth with courage,
To live simply, and

To care for the poorest and least, the homeless and the ill.

Like John, may we decrease
so that your love may increase in our lives.

We ask this in the name of Jesus, Your son,

Amen.

(Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17; Romans 15:4-9)