

When I was a young Christian Brother (*and dinosaurs roamed the earth*), I taught in an inner city Catholic high school. Francisco was athletic and very bright. He was not unlike many Stanford students, except he went to Harvard on a four year free ride. Like many other seniors, he wrote his name on a the bricks in the alcove to the Brothers' house. It is still visible and beside his name he wrote, ***"I am no longer prey to dark uncertainties."*** *I had to laughed, would that our dark uncertainties disappeared so easily. ... I let Frank enjoy the moment; reality is its own teacher. But for now, he was leaving the barrio for a future bright with hope. He didn't have yet that meta-narrative, that deeper story that gives us sustains us through life's ups and downs.*

None of us likes uncertainty! But certainty can be blinding. Ambiguity in life, politics and religion *seems* to many Americans as falling short. ... Yet it is questioning the leads to the next insight. Ambiguity can be an invitation to look for surprises.

Today we celebrate the death of John the Baptist. He *vigorously* proclaimed God's word and warning, yet was *surprisingly* hesitant. He leapt in his mother's womb for Jesus, announced his coming, baptized him, pointed to him as greater, but *never followed him!* ... *Curious!* ... He defended Torah and denounced Herod and Herodias, earning him a Jewish martyrs' crown. ... *But God didn't cooperate!* One can imagine him saying to God: *"Help me out, God! Back me up!"* ... He had the certainty of so many shrill preachers who can't imagine a God of surprises!

In the depths of the dungeon and doubt, grace happened and he had to face his own *dark uncertainties*. Courageously, he didn't keep silent, but sent two disciples to Jesus: **"Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"** *Luke 7:19 Can't you hear the pain and doubt in his words?*

Jesus wasn't the sort of Messiah John wanted. Jesus didn't fit John's description when he said: **"His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his**

threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”? *Luke 3:17 John wanted someone different!*

No wonder Jesus said of him: **I tell you, among those born of women, no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.**” *Luke 7:28*

But give John this praise, he questioned himself; he questioned Jesus! Unlike Herod, Herodias and even Michal, whose power, hatred and disgust blinded them to the men before them. ... I know my certainties can blind me. They tempt me to tempt to ignore new information, twist old facts, or simply be oblivious.

John was honest with himself! he seized the grace of a doubt and *asked the question, "Are you the one who is to come...?"*

Here’s John’s challenge and a comfort. We have in John the Baptist a patron saint for those of us who wrestle with uncertainties. *He is a model for asking the question, and a comfort for those who still don’t see for he .. is a saint! We don’t know John’s response, but we know Jesus’ – the kingdom of God is his.*

Jesus invites us as he invited John *to look again: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."*

Now admittedly the school of miracles isn’t readily available. *(Though I am convinced they are closer than we imagine, having been one removed from a number of them.)* But miracles, like proofs don’t convince; they entice.

Let me suggest Jesus is pointing to another school ... Jesus’ concern for the blind, the lame, the leper, the deaf, the poor and even the dead. Let me suggest John was scandalized not merely because Jesus wasn’t God’s **“winnowing fan”**; but because he too reached out to the wrong sort.

John seems a bit like Saul’s daughter, Michal, who saw David’s dancing as beneath the king. David wasn’t the sort of king she wanted, *compassion wasn’t the sort of righteousness John wanted. He wanted something more vigorous.*

It wasn't so many years ago that I was in Israel, visiting a site that had been closed for decades to pilgrims. A church marked the spot where Byzantine tradition identified as one place where John baptized.

As I gazed on the disappointment that is the Jordan River, I wondered why John baptized in the Jordan at all. There were a lot more convenient *and cleaner places*.

Joshua's crossing the Jordan with the ark and the covenant renewal ceremony that followed came to mind. *It seems to me* John was inviting a new passage into Holy Land. His baptisms were renewal ceremonies in which people pledged themselves anew to live Torah. ... *But one thing is clear, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, would've been in short supply.*

Jesus did not espouse a holiness of separation, but one of compassion. Jesus was a different Messiah than John preached.

Forgive this Friar, for reading here a line from Pope Francis' latest letter, but since he addressed it to you; it's yours too. He offered an insight that is at the core of his thinking about the planet's plight, the poor's suffering and people's pain. ***It cuts through the ambiguity that we want to live in and it points a way out.*** He writes:

"Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it."

Real compassion is solidarity that becomes action. Jesus did miracles not as proofs, but as acts of God's compassion. Jesus was asking John to see God's care and concern for the marginalized as the core; to focus not on the miracles, *per se* but on the people cured. *Real compassion is solidarity that becomes action.*

Jesus invites us still ... ***"to dare to turn what is happening to the world [and that includes the poor and the hurting] into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it."***

Might I suggest, John and we ourselves will not find the answer to our dark uncertainties until we find the heart of God. And every time we see greed give way to generosity, hatred give way to forgiveness, entitlement give way to

service, selfishness give way to selflessness ... that's a miracle and we have
cause for dance!