

## The Second Sunday of Advent: John v. Dolly

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My friend, James, uses a flip phone and doesn't text much. But I got a message from him Friday recommending a new podcast: Dolly Parton's America. By the way, as a rule, if a friend with a flip phone recommends a podcast, you should always check it out.

And James's timing was perfect, as Ardelle and I were on our way to Northwest Arkansas for a funeral, so we started the first episode as we drove out of Little Rock after lunch. And we were transfixed for the next three hours.

There will eventually be nine episodes. Which means you're in luck. I figure there's easily enough sermon material to get us through next Easter.

Now, I probably should admit to you that I did not grow up loving Dolly Parton, or country music for that matter. And neither did Jad Abumrad, the show's creator. As a skinny Arab kid in Nashville, who entered high school during the first Gulf War, he didn't think of himself as being included in the nostalgia of a song like "My Tennessee Mountain Home."

But it was the fact that suddenly all sorts of unlikely people *are included* in Dolly's fan club that led Jad to delve into her story. You see, according to a 40+ year old celebrity rating system called the Q Score, Dolly Parton is one of the top ten most broadly beloved musicians in the world. And she's one of the top two in terms of having the lowest negative ratings. Almost nobody hates Dolly. And this is true across generations and gender, politics and race and class. In these deeply divided times, how is it that a rhinestoned, heavily made up 73 year old country music singer who jokes freely about her affection for botox, browlifts, and other augmentations... How did she become the one to transcend our differences and divisions better than almost anyone else?

Well, there's a moment in the first episode that feels like a hint. It's an episode about the first songs Dolly was writing back in the late '60s. And, friends, these songs were grim. "Sad ass songs" is what Dolly calls them.

"Daddy Come and Get Me" begins, "In this mental institution looking out through these iron bars..." And it told of a time when a man might get his wife committed for things like — and these were documented criteria — nagging, excitement, or disagreeing with her husband's religious beliefs. There was another one about a pregnant girl abandoned by her lover, standing on the bridge where she first met him, thinking about ending her life.

When asked where these early songs came from, Dolly said, "Well... all those old mountain songs and all those old songs from the old world. All those English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh ballads about the Knoxville girl getting killed and throwed in the Knoxville River... I was very, you know, impressionable."

Jad did not know the one about the Knoxville gal getting throwed in the river. He looked it up later, and it is horrible, even by murder ballad standards. "I picked a stick up off the ground and knocked that fair girl down," it begins, and goes downhill further from there. These were the songs Dolly Parton grew up with, so she thought it made sense that her first songs would deal with human beings at our worst. But Jad noticed a difference. A radical difference, actually.

Almost all the old murder ballads are told from the perspective of the murderer, who is almost always a man. But in a world used to hearing from the victor, Dolly gave voice to the victims. In her

songs we heard from the one who's been abused or abandoned. We hear from the hopeless one herself, on the bridge or in the asylum, and we hear her in her own words.

It's the same old tragic human story. But it's not. It's not the same story when it's told in the voice of the victim. And this is a gospel truth. This is *the* gospel truth, some might even say.

That's a lot of Dolly Parton and no John the Baptist at all so far in this Advent sermon. But with John's appearance on the scene today, a tectonic plate in the Hebrew faith is beginning to shift. Or, maybe it's better said that a powerful shift in perspective is underway.

Jesus's cousin John is a famously eccentric character. That camel hair he's wearing is not a coat from Oak Hall. He's a man of the wilderness who wears what he finds there and eats what the earth puts forth on its own. He's eccentric, but not unfamiliar to Biblical people. Matthew tells us he's the one Isaiah spoke of centuries earlier. "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" John's that kind of character, the writer of Matthew says.

But the tone and content and worldview implicit in John's rantings would have been familiar too. This is a prophet of the "apocalyptic imagination," to use theologian James Alison's term. And, strange as it sounds, it is this apocalyptic imagination that is about to be undone by the one whose sandals John says he's unworthy to untie.

Apocalyptic literature was a genre. It wasn't just a literature about the end of time. It was a way of telling a story. A language about the way things are. And in the apocalyptic way of seeing, the categories are stark. All of them. There is darkness and there is light. Clean and unclean. Good and evil. Fruitful trees and kindling for a fire. Vipers and the faithful. And there is also wrath. Wrath that will set the world straight according to these clear categories.

This is John the Baptist's way of seeing, right? But we Christians, even in Advent, are not followers of John, but of the one he pointed to. And in Jesus, the apocalyptic imagination would be turned completely around. This messiah, the one with the axe and the winnowing fork in John's vision, this messiah will be unrecognizable to everyone, even John, who was looking for a violent victor to come set things right. In Jesus, the voice will be the victim's.

I'll mention James Alison just this one more time to say while any errors or confusions in this sermon are mine, any insight that is interesting or enlightening is almost certainly his. Including the idea that even though the apocalyptic perspective is prevalent in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, quite often it is the backdrop for a subversion of the violent normal of the time and the violent way any redemption was expected to occur.

In fact, if we go back to the very first murder story in the Bible, there is a reversal taking place, even there. Remember it? Cain has murdered his brother Abel because God has accepted Abel's sacrifice, but not Cain's. It's as strange as mountain murder ballad to us now. But a brother killing a brother would have been a familiar trope to ancient people.

Take the myth of Romulus and Remus. Brother murders brother in this story as well, but it is Romulus, the killer and victor, who goes on to found the city of Rome. In the Biblical story something essential is reversed. God does not give the spoils to the victor. God says, "Listen! Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground..." In God, the victim is given voice.

What does this have to do with John the Baptist? Well, John prepares the way, but he does so with the old apocalyptic imagination. The old apocalyptic language describing a violent and victorious savior. He's so trapped in this mode of imagining the world that later when he's in prison, he sends messengers to Jesus, asking, "Are you really the one we are waiting for or should we wait for someone else?" The wilderness prophet who warned the local vipers about a messiah whose axe was laid at the root of the tree... a messiah of fire, wielding a winnowing fork... Well, what he got was a prophet who would not let us rest in the stark old categories of the apocalyptic imagination, would he?

Jesus had been saying things like, "You're smug about not being a murderer yourself, but if you hate your brother or sister, it's the stuff of murder that's swirling around in your heart, too. You're

pleased about not being an adulterer? Well if you reduce another human being to an object of your desire, you've got the adulterer's mind already."

He's the one who would over and over again, reach out to the unclean, to the categorically sinful ones, to women, to children, to foreigners. This messiah came and began disrupting all the apocalyptic categories upon which people's very identities were founded.

That parable he told about the Pharisee thanking God he's not like the tax collector? Friends, that's every one of us who's ever built part of our identity on not being someone who personifies what's wrong with the world. Jesus was the one who asked us in a thousand ways, "So, who's your tax collector? Who's your viper? Are you really so different? So pure? I'm giving voice to these excluded ones, these victims of your righteous, apocalyptic imaginations. Which means if you're going to hear the good news of redemption, you may have to hear it in the voice of someone you've spent your life trying never to be."

It's not wrong to say we live in apocalyptic times, is it? John the Baptist's language is familiar to us. To be honest, we're probably still looking for the messiah who never showed up two thousand years ago, or for the return of one we hope will look a little more like what John expected this time.

But maybe this just means we've come into yet another Advent needing the same disruption of perspective we always have. Our imaginations are in need of transformation again. They need to be turned from the heroic victor we think we want, and tuned to hear the voice of the victim, to whom God still listens. Through whom God still speaks. And maybe Advent is a season in which we listen even to those lost and wounded parts of our selves we've been trying to keep hidden away at all costs for so long.

To whom do you listen and in whom do you hope and how do you tell the story of a world made finally right? If there's too little of the victim and too much John the Baptist in the voices we listen to most, we may still be missing the One anointed and ready to come into our lives and turn our perspectives completely around today.