

Descending and Ascending

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The writer of the Gospel of John has John the Witness (a.k.a. John the Baptist in the other Gospels) saying, upon seeing Jesus approaching him:

"Look! Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin." (1:29b)

And then John the Witness goes on to explain that it is this Jesus whom he has been talking about all along as the one who ranks above him (despite all the attention that John has been receiving from people in Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside) and who existed before him (long, long before him, at least in the minds of both John the Witness and John the Writer).

But if once wasn't enough, the writer of the fourth Gospel has John the Witness use the same words the following day--this time accompanied by two of his associates--when again spotting Jesus:

"Look, here is the Lamb of God." (1:36)

John the Writer's account of this earliest part of Jesus' ministry differs from the ones furnished by Matthew, Mark and Luke, not just in the words spoken and actions taken when Jesus first appears to John the Witness/Baptizer.

In the Synoptic Gospels, for example, all of the words and actions take place on one day; but in the Gospel of John this is stretched over a three-day period.

But more significantly, in the Synoptic Gospels John the Baptizer baptizes Jesus, while in the Gospel of John there is no baptism of Jesus at all (and, by the way, no account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness).

But there is agreement on one matter among all four of the Gospel writers: the divine sign of Jesus' chosen-ness is represented by the descending of the Divine Spirit like a dove upon Jesus.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke this descending of the Spirit like a dove occurs after Jesus comes up out of the water, and in these Gospels the divine action is accompanied by a voice from heaven confirming publicly that Jesus is the "beloved Son" with whom God is well pleased (or, in whom God's will is pleased to dwell).

In the baptism-less Gospel of John there are no public words from heaven, just John the

Witness publicly testifying to the descending of the Spirit and the supposedly heavenly words given to him privately:

"I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on Jesus. I myself did not know who it was, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The person on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Child/Chosen of God." (1:32-33)

Here, as in the other Gospels, the word and act of chosen-ness is associated with descending.

If only such a descending sign were available as we choose in this election year!

Imagine, it could all be settled in a day or three, instead of what is turning out this election cycle to be nearly two years.

But in a democracy the vector of word and act involved in choosing is reversed--not descending, but ascending--since the people not above but from below rule. So maybe the expanded period of testing candidates before finally choosing is appropriate and even necessary.

To be sure, we aren't involved in choosing, or recognizing, or testifying to the Messiah, or the Christ, or, as John the Witness/Baptizer put it, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" in this election.

We aren't, in that sense, seeking to determine who should sacrifice herself or himself on behalf of and for the life of the people at some ultimate and ontological level, as would indeed be the case for that "Lamb of God" in the Johannine text and some of the literature in the Hebrew scriptures.

Still, there might be something to be gained for us in the worldly sphere of electoral politics by drawing from the words that John the Witness/Baptizer used to identify Jesus as the Lamb being the one who "takes away the sin of the world."

The lives of some six and a half billion people are rather immediately at stake in the choices U.S. citizens are making not just for themselves but for the world in these months: the condition of those six and a half billion lives and literally whether some of them will have life at all, whether they will have, that is, a premature death caused by war, by famine, by neglect or by one or more forms of fundamental injustice.

Add to that the consequences that will befall future generations by the choices we American citizens are making this year.

So I hope you will not think me as sacrilegious by proposing that the words John the Witness/Baptizer uses to describe Jesus as the one "who takes away the sin of the world" must be used as a criterion for choosing candidates for president, for senator and representative, for

governor, and all the elected offices in which the fate of the people and of the creation will rest.

Who, among these candidates, will genuinely contribute to "taking away the sin of the world?"

Who will help us all take away the sin of global warming and destruction of the creation, the sin of war and belligerence, the sin of starvation and malnutrition, the sin of poverty and oppression, the sin of inequality and injustice?

Who, that is, will lead us, not just rhetorically and not only with vision, but also with the development of specific public policies that embody what together we see as a truly common good?

In the convergence of God's descending to us always and in our ascending now to meet our responsibilities as citizens not just of the nation but of the world, we have again the opportunity to participate in taking away the sin of God's world as probably never before.