

January 21, Epiphany 3B (Mark 1:14-20)

The gospels don't depict John as much of an organization builder.

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [January 2024](#) issue

In history as in fiction, the event of a succession in leadership is a reliable moment of high drama. Sometimes a leader fails to plan for it (Lenin wrote some warnings about Stalin but left the dictatorship he invented open to Stalin's maneuverings), sometimes a leader makes plans but the survivors ignore them (Edward VI named Lady Jane Grey as his heir, but she ended up losing the crown and her head to her cousin Mary), and sometimes death catches the old boss too soon (Logan Roy, dithering among his inadequate offspring in *Succession*). Often the leader's followers have to make the best plans they can on their own.

I recall a professor telling us that when Luther was in hiding in Wartburg and his friends assumed he was captured or killed, some asked when Erasmus would step up to take on the mantle of leading the reform movement. All of a sudden, a center of energy and legitimacy is gone, and everyone close to it is immediately subject to danger and quick shifts in direction. It's a time of new possibilities, both fearful and exciting.

While John the Baptist appears in all four gospels, only in Mark and Matthew is his arrest noted as the catalyst for Jesus' public ministry. And it's only in Mark that Jesus is not specifically singled out by John himself as the one who was to come after him. It's not clear that anyone besides Jesus sees the heavens opened and hears the voice from above at his baptism. So when Mark records that Jesus' ministry begins after John is arrested, there is no indication that this amounts to the execution of an established succession plan. The base of support for John's political-religious revival movement is, in that moment, like sheep without a shepherd.

The gospels don't depict John as much of an organization builder. This distinguishes him from the likes of Lenin, Edward VI, and Logan Roy. When a leader of profound individual charisma departs the scene, one major risk is that their movement will

simply dissipate or fragment into squabbling factions. And it is not hard to imagine that the minimally portrayed Jesus of Mark's Gospel might, at first, seem like something other than a natural heir to John's movement, such as it is. We get no indication that he appears in the deliberately archaic costume of camel's hair. Is this really the person we should be following? Is this really the time for whatever it is that John is foretelling? We might well imagine that those first disciples he calls have been led by John's prophetic activity to expect something, that they are primed to follow. But it's hard to imagine anyone, except perhaps Jesus himself, is especially confident that this is the particular path to follow.

It became customary in Christian iconography to show John pointing to Jesus, as if his role were confined to announcing a person and not calling the masses to a messianic age. But in Mark's Gospel, when Jesus starts proclaiming that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, he is not stepping into an open space John has humbly left for him. He is not following John's warm-up act. He's picking up the mantle of a fallen hero and carrying it forward in a new way. It's not part of anyone's plan but God's.

Perhaps this makes the launching of the Galilean ministry and the response of Simon, Andrew, James, and John all the more moving and poignant. Perhaps they have been waiting not for a promised messenger but for a continuation of a thrilling message. They don't need John's stamp of approval on the next guy; they need hope that the prophetic word and mission hasn't failed.

Of course, it will all go in directions none of them, at this point, can anticipate. Whatever John has taught the people to hope and to work for will only be ambiguously fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus and its ongoing aftermath. Jesus' own followers will have to discern a truly shocking and scandalous succession plan in hindsight, as they claim that he has been killed and yet raised from the dead and has entrusted his disciples not to a single charismatic figure but to their mutual wisdom and the care of the Holy Spirit. Before long, that community of disciples will be as riven and rivalrous as the children of any mogul and, later on, as violently conflicted as any civil state.

But for now, at the beginning, there is only the prophetic silence into which Jesus speaks. If the kingdom of God, as Jesus says, has come near, it is not as the unfolding of a plan but as the sudden interruption of that fretful silence.