

[Spirituality](#)

[Pencil Preaching](#)



by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

[patrickjmarrin@gmail.com](mailto:patrickjmarrin@gmail.com).

## [\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

December 13, 2020

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)



“By what authority are you doing these things” (Matthew 21:24).

*Num 24:2-7, 15-17a; Matt 21:23-27*

The interrogation of John the Baptist by the priests from Jerusalem was to determine whether he was from God. The idea of authority was crucial. Was he the Christ, Elijah, or one of the other prophets? Jesus is put to these same tests by the scribes and Pharisees. His miracles, the power of his preaching or his popularity with the crowds were not enough to convince them.

The more antagonistic they became over Jesus’ teachings about mercy for sinners and the priority of the commandment of love over other rules like sabbath observance and ritual purity, the more the scribes, priest and Pharisees attacked his authority. He could not be from God. He was a heretic, too radical, too demanding, not demanding enough. They even accuse him of being an agent of Satan. Deep down, they do not want their own authority undermined by this hill country preacher who, like the desert radical John, was calling them to repentance and a change of heart.

In today’s Gospel, when they demand that Jesus tell them by what authority he was teaching, he traps them by asking if they accepted the authority of John. If they say no, this will incite the people, who revered John. If they say yes, then why did they not accept John’s baptism?

The Lectionary pairs this Gospel with the story of a Moabite seer named Balaam, a foreigner, who was ordered by his king to curse Israel. Instead, Balaam blesses Israel because God shows him the rise of the “star of Jacob.” If even foreign prophets can discern God’s favor, why are the religious scholars of Israel blind to Jesus the Christ, whose authority was evident in his words and his works?

The “By what authority?” is not a small question. As a nation we have recently witnessed the importance of our system of courts with the authority to decide an election being challenged and protested. When it comes to religion, church authority provides stability and historical continuity but still cannot by itself be the bedrock of our faith, which rests on the assent of each believer. No bishop or theologian can believe for us. Each of us must make the leap of faith that leads to discipleship.

At the same time, Advent reminds us how blessed we are to be part of communities of faith. We go to God together. We celebrate God’s presence at Christmas not just in the privacy of our hearts but also in the community of all the baptized, in the shared hope of the human family on earth. In the days ahead we will meet one another on the journey to Bethlehem, at the closed door of the inn, by the hillside cave in the company of shepherds and kings, in the joy of Mary and Joseph as they welcome their child and our Savior.

Advertisement