

We ran out of milk so I made a rare late-night trip to the grocery store. Grabbing my half gallon, I got in line behind two young men, both wearing sweat shirts with the name of a nearby university stitched on the front. I assumed they were students. They were engaged in a heated discussion, which had obviously been going on for a while:

First Student: “I think believing in Jesus is a cop-out.”

Second Student: “How can you say that? Jesus Christ is Lord of the Universe!”

First Student: “Oh, really? The Jesus you’ve described to me is no more than a cosmic pinch-hitter. He takes the heat, and we don’t have to do anything.”

Second Student: “But Jesus is Lord!”

First Student: “Sure, if ‘being Lord’ means that we get to sit back, in the privacy of our living rooms, and leave the work to him. How convenient: stick the pre-cooked Jesus package in the microwave for three minutes, and presto, we’re saved!”

I drove home, smiling to myself about that theological conversation I had just heard in the checkout line. But then I gave more thought to their particular discussion. It certainly is possible to think that if Jesus has done all the work of salvation, as the first student claimed, then we might be entitled to accept a kind of Couch-Potato Theology. We can sit back, enjoy life, and never do anything more strenuous than pick up the remote control to flip through the channels for choices we no longer need to make, content to passively watch how others are acting and living. In military terminology, we can “stand down,” because Jesus has stood up.

Speaking of standing down and standing up, John the Baptist has been hearing through the grapevine that Jesus is doing some interesting things. John is in prison at the moment, with lots of time on his hands. He wonders, “What is going on? Where does my message of repentance and forgiveness of sins figure into Jesus’ ministry?” John wants to know! So, John sends his disciples on a mission to ask Jesus a critical question: “*Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?*” (Matthew 11:3).

Jesus could have given John’s disciples a one-word answer (“Yes”) and sent them packing. Instead, he offers a chance for John to decide for himself, based on the evidence presented: “*Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them*” (vv. 4-5).

Then, Jesus assures John—somewhat mysteriously—that in time they will be blessed: “*Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me*” (v. 6).

John’s ministry was to fulfill a specific function: foretelling the coming of the kingdom of God, and urging all who will listen that they must repent of their sins—clean up their act—in preparation for that kingdom. But now the focus shifts to Jesus. When Jesus lists the evidence, I think he expects the allusions to Isaiah 35 and 61 to be obvious: “*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert... The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD*

has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.” But he leaves something out: The prophet’s mission to encourage the people in exile in Isaiah 61:1 includes this too: *“He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners...”* If I was John, I’d be waiting to hear that Jesus will spring me from the fortress of Machaerus—Herod’s dungeon. But I’m afraid John is going to be sadly disappointed. For him the wait will continue.

By what Jesus doesn’t say signals to John’s disciples that John’s part in the fulfillment of the kingdom is completed. John’s ministry has been the hinge between the prophets of Israel and Judah and the Messiah who is to come. John has done his job. Now, so it seems, it is up to Jesus to bring in the kingdom that John announced. John must stand down, and Jesus must stand up.

For nearly two thousand years Jews in every corner of the globe have ended their Passover Seder with the ritual line, “Next year in Jerusalem,” notes Ron Walters. That rallying call expressed the ancient hope of all Jews—a passion to return one day to their ancestral home, a burning wish that nineteen centuries of persecution had failed to extinguish. They waited and waited. And the wait was worth it.

On May 14, 1948, at 4:00 o’clock in the afternoon, a black sedan pulled up to the Tel Aviv Museum on Rothschild Boulevard. Out stepped David Ben-Gurion, the bantam-sized Jewish warrior and soon-to-be Prime Minister. He bounded up the marble steps, saluted the military guards, and took his place at the podium, under two enormous Star-of-David flags in the main hall of the museum.

Ben-Gurion (meaning “son of the lion cub”) slowly panned the crowd of dignitaries and journalists, sensing history in the making. In a deliberate, sometimes broken voice he began to read aloud Israel’s Declaration of Independence to a visibly moved audience. In part it read:

“On November 29, 1947, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution providing for an independent Jewish state in Palestine... In the light of natural law and the history of the Jewish people, as well as in accordance with the resolution of the United Nations, we proclaim the foundation of the Jewish state in the Holy Land which will bear henceforth the name of The State of Israel. It will be founded on the principles of liberty, justice and peace, just as they were conceived by the prophets of Israel...”

When Ben-Gurion concluded the reading, the thirty-seven members of the National Council signed the document—many as they wept uncontrollably. Israel had waited and waited, but now the wait was over. Against all odds, the country was theirs again.

Two millennia earlier, another long wait was going on; not for a country but for a Savior. God had given the prophets a sneak preview, and commissioned them as special agents to announce the news of the coming Messiah.

As they wrote the words of prophecy, they ached to see the day when, *“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (God with us).”* They yearned to be on location when the Savior arrived. These prophets told of His forerunner, His mission, His ministry, His teaching, His triumphal entry, His rejection, His betrayal, His death, His resurrection, His ascension, and three hundred other specific prophecies. They waited...

And, at the perfect time, the eventful announcement came: *“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”* The wait for the Messiah was finally over. That announcement, first made by angels to humble shepherds, is now ours to share. There can be no better news, and no greater joy—the Savior of the world is born. God is indeed with us!

Neither John the Baptist nor Jesus could have comprehended our 21st century Couch-Potato Theology. Each of them were well aware that they were called by God to particular work. Each of them had to step up to the challenges before them. Neither of them got a free ride; but neither do we. There is a time for standing down and there is a time for standing up.

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (2005) is the sixth and you might say the darkest of J. K. Rowling’s series about the boy wizard and the education he undergoes at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. In this sixth novel, Harry finds himself at a hinge moment. He has been in training for six years, learning the various skills needed to become a full-fledged adult wizard. The evil Lord Voldemort, who has made increasingly lethal efforts in each of the previous Harry Potter stories to destroy Harry, has now become sufficiently powerful to threaten the continuing existence of Hogwarts School, along with Harry’s mentor and headmaster Albus Dumbledore, Harry’s friends Ron and Hermione, and Harry himself.

In the course of this complicated story, Harry and Professor Dumbledore are lured into a trap that is both cunning and evil. Harry is ultimately powerless to stop Dumbledore’s murder by the minions of Lord Voldemort.

Dumbledore’s death psychologically crushes Harry. As he sits among his fellow Hogwarts students at Dumbledore’s funeral service, Harry realizes in a flash of insight that his last and greatest protector is gone. One by one, Harry’s parents (who died prior to the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, and protected him since infancy from Voldemort), his godfather (who died in the fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, at the same task), and now Professor Dumbledore have been eliminated. Harry has come of age. He will have to find Voldemort and kill him. Harry’s time as a spectator—his childhood—is now past. Harry Potter must now stand up for himself.

“Go and tell John what you hear and see...” says Jesus to John’s disciples. Jesus was already teaching and preaching in the towns of Galilee. *“I must find Voldemort myself...”* says Harry Potter. The time will come for all of us to act. But what is expected? What lies ahead as we move along the path of faith?

The individual details will differ for each of us, but the basic fact remains: the Christian faith is no spectator sport. We simply cannot expect to be Couch-Potato Christians. We must listen to the words of Jesus that call us to action, and then seek with all our hearts to join Jesus in his work.

Others have stood up before us, but now it is our turn. As they stand down, we must learn to stand up. This is what Jesus is calling us to do...

Go and tell others what you hear and see! Amen.