

We went down to Ruby Apple's house last Friday to clean it out. For someone who never placed much value on material possessions, Ruby collected quite a few of them in her little farmhouse on Grimes Lake Road. **To be fair, a lot of them belonged to her five children who left home without taking their stuff with them.** My advice to you is to be good, simple Quakers and get rid of your stuff before you die so your children won't have to. Have a yard sale. Do something, but get shed of it. The last week of my life I'm planning on having a fire.

But we went down there, Joan, the boys, and I, and Joan's sister, Betty, and we cleaned and sorted and threw away. **I know some people have to do that by themselves, and can't imagine how Sisyphean that would feel, to push that boulder up the hill all by yourself, with no one to lend a hand.** "I get by," John Lennon wrote, "with a little help from my friends." Don't we all.

The story of John the Baptist is a story about a little help from a friend. Mary is on the verge of pregnancy, when God pauses to consider the formidable task Jesus will face, and God says, "He's going to need help. I will send someone out before him to straighten the path, to turn the hearts, to prepare the people." **So along came John.**

A good reminder that there are some tasks we would never entertain doing alone, but would joyfully undertake with others.

God knows Jesus isn't going to have it easy. **The world before Jesus had not been kind to prophets.** Jeremiah—beaten, imprisoned. Isaiah—tradition held that he was sawn in half. Amos—tortured and slain. Habbakkuk—stoned to death by his own people.

Perhaps John the Baptist was God's way of getting people used to the idea of Jesus. Send John out to blaze the trail. **Let people know Jesus was coming, that it was God's idea, so pay attention, this man Jesus has something to teach you.** Perhaps God is thinking people will listen if they have a little notice, if there's a voice in the wilderness preparing the way. **It's never easy to have a prophet sprung on you.** Prophets are generally pointing out something we need to change, usually something we don't want to change. We're not always happy with our prophets. In the Bible, whenever a prophet spoke, it was generally followed by this verse, "Then the people wailed and gnashed their teeth." **We need a little time to get used to prophets.**

**I'm no prophet, but I remember when I was getting ready to give my first sermon, I thought I was a prophet.** It's a common misperception among some pastors.

I'd been asked to preach at the weekly meeting for worship at the Quaker Village apartments in Plainfield. **So I wrote this long sermon in which I outlined the 10-15 things the people there needed to do to get back on God's good side.** I was going to unload the whole truck on them. Be prophetic. Sling a few thunderbolts. Call down a little lightning, some snap, crackle, and pop, the whole nine yards.

I wrote out the sermon and showed it to my senior pastor, Keith Kirk. Keith was such a kind man, so wise. He said, "Phil, why don't you just get to know them first. Let them get to know you." **I think maybe that's what God had in mind for John the Baptist to do for Jesus.** Pave the way a little bit, make straight the path. Get people used to the idea of Jesus, let them get to know Jesus through the words of John, so they'd be more likely to listen.

But John was more than that, too. He was also Jesus's help, his right hand. Because there are some tasks we would never entertain doing alone, but would joyfully undertake with others. **Sometimes just knowing we're not facing some big job all by ourselves is all the inspiration we need to go ahead with something.** Just last night we had this big pile of dirty laundry that needed washing, and I gave Joan a hug and said, "You can do it, honey." And just knowing I was right there beside her, in the next room watching a movie, was enough for her.

No, here's the thing. It's more like this. When Spencer was born, there weren't enough private rooms at the hospital, so we had to share a room with a pregnant single teenager. Joan and the teenage girl each delivered their babies the same day, but we were overjoyed while the teenage girl was overwhelmed. **What was the difference?** Joan and I had one another, while that young girl had no one. That was the difference. There are some tasks we would never entertain doing alone, but would joyfully undertake with others.

There are some things that, if I had to do them all by myself, would overwhelm me. **But when others come along beside me and extend a hand, the task becomes not only possible, it becomes a joy.**

I remember when we started talking about building a new meetinghouse eight years ago. Another pastor, not in the Quaker tradition, told me, "Everything depends on you." And like an idiot I believed him. But he was the kind of person who wanted to be in charge of everything, and people like that think everything depends on them. That's why some people have heart attacks and die young. **But I felt all this pressure, then one night Joan sat me down and said, "It doesn't all depend on you. There are others who want to help."** That felt so good. There are some tasks we could never entertain doing alone, but would joyfully undertake with others. It can even be fun and exciting.

You know, friends, there are times each of us feel anxious and overwhelmed and alone in this world. But if we look around, we'll notice other people walking the path with us, who will do with us what we can not do alone.

As we set our eyes toward Christmas, let this be our first lesson. Saint Matthew said it well: Behold, a young maiden shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be Emmanuel, which means God is with us. Let's not forget that. God is with us. So are others. And that's how we get by. With a little help from our friends.