Forerunners like John

Not everyone who makes a difference in the world gets the credit—or seeks it.

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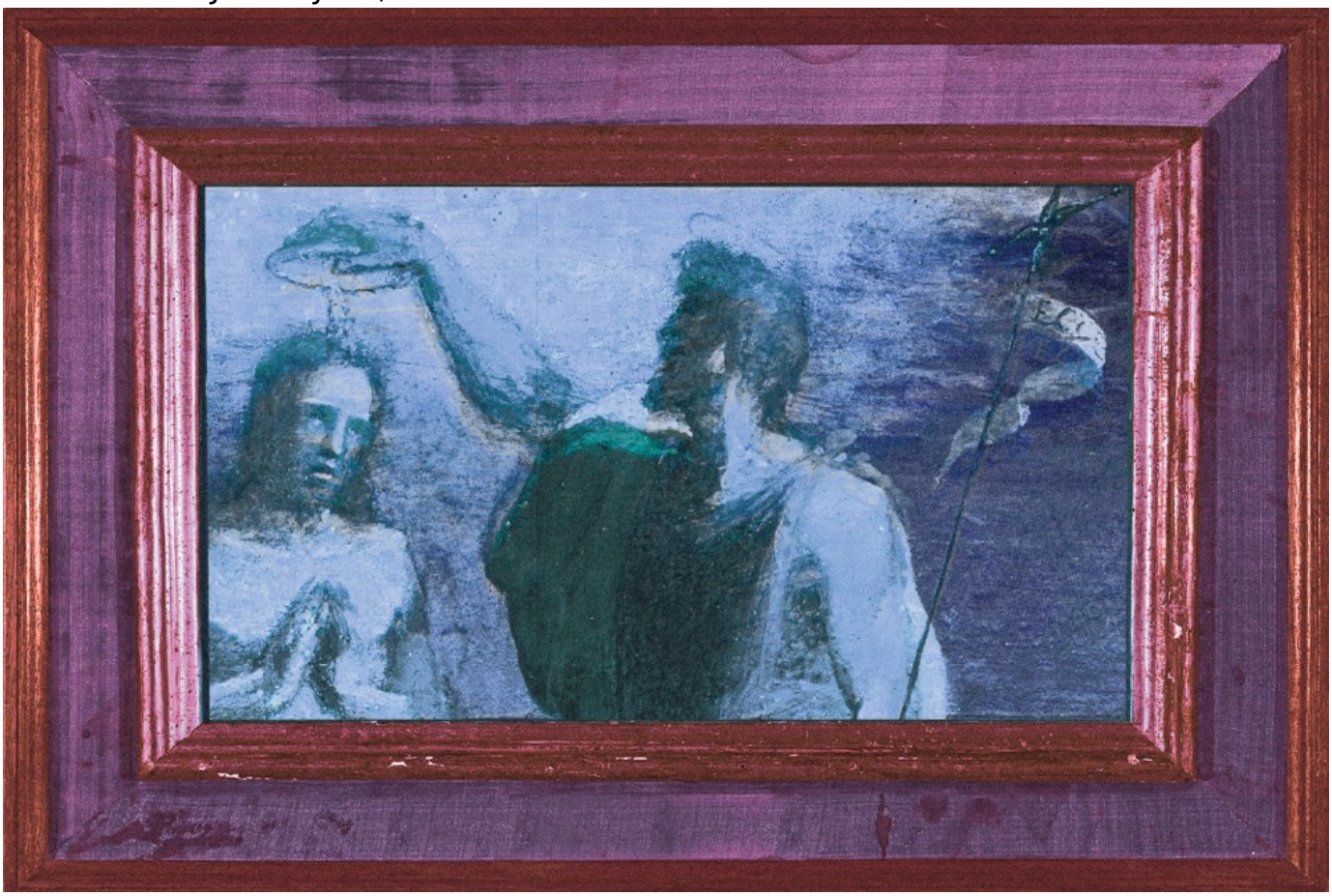

From Domenico Beccafumi’s The Baptism of Christ (1528)

The 2024 Netflix drama *Joy* tells the story of Jean Purdy, a British nurse and embryologist, who in 1968 comes to interview with the physiologist Robert Edwards at his lab in Cambridge. Edwards wants to transform the condition of infertility by inserting an egg fertilized outside the body. Collaborating with obstetrician Patrick Steptoe, Edwards begins a ten-year journey toward this ambitious goal. He faces

opposition from the medical research community. Meanwhile Purdy's increasingly vital role leads to strained relationships with her mother, her rector, and her church, who believe her work is morally wrong. Finally in 1978 the first in vitro baby, Louise Brown, is born.

The story is made more poignant as alongside it we behold Purdy's own experience of endometriosis; Steptoe tells her she cannot bear a child. Eleven years after her key role in this world-changing breakthrough, Purdy dies of melanoma at age 39. In 2011 the Nobel committee recognizes these three medical pioneers but awards the prize to Edwards alone, since it can only go to a living person.

We may think of Purdy as a modern-day John the Baptist: vital, yet often omitted from the story. John is integral to the gospel narrative yet largely adjacent to Jesus. He says, "Prepare the way." Jean Purdy prepared the way.

As a famous quotation says, "There's no limit to what can be achieved so long as nobody minds who gets the credit." Ironically, quite a few people have been given credit for this line. It's likely that the first person to say it was a Jesuit priest in the 19th century. But it's appropriate that no one really knows for sure. John the Baptist was evidently someone who didn't seek the credit for himself, and many people have walked in his footsteps.

Bill Arlow was born in County Down as a Protestant Ulsterman, although one of his grandparents was a Catholic. He traveled to Edinburgh in the late 1950s to study at the same theological college I would attend 30 years later. In 1970, as the Troubles were taking hold, he became rector of a parish in East Belfast. One of his early experiences there was to minister to a youth shot in the head by a paramilitary member, cradling the young man's head as he breathed his last.

Arlow began to form relationships with paramilitaries on both sides. Finally in 1974, in Feakle, County Clare, he convened a meeting between Protestant church leaders and the IRA Army Council. He got a pasting from Protestant hard-liner Ian Paisley, who referred to the meeting participants as "the fickle Feakle clergy." But the outcome was a unilateral IRA ceasefire over Christmas 1974 and a bilateral truce that lasted till the following September. Arlow continued to meet not just with the paramilitaries but with families of their victims, who were dismayed by any talk of reconciliation. The Troubles resumed and continued for another 25 years.

But in the 1980s, Arlow began to use some prophetic words to describe his ministry: “It’s better to fail in a cause that will finally succeed than to succeed in a cause that will finally fail.” He started saying this years before the Good Friday Agreement was finally signed in 1998. By the time that peace deal was reached, not many people remembered the contribution Arlow and others had made 25 years before. But their work made them the forerunners for John Hume, David Trimble, Tony Blair, and George Mitchell and what they achieved a generation later.

It’s one thing to be shunned by those you love most, to face opposition from church, state, researchers, and the media, to die before your work sees full fruition, to not have your contribution recognized in your lifetime. That was Jean Purdy’s story. But Bill Arlow’s bold initiative was derided by his colleagues, languished in naïveté and failure after initial success, and 50 years later is forgotten even as the vaunted achievements of those who followed are accorded endless praise.

Yet in the face of Arlow, John the Baptist becomes a more relatable figure. One who inspires us to reflect on the causes in which we’ve succeeded that will finally fail and the causes in which we’ve failed that will finally succeed. But John comes not just to inspire us amid our floundering endeavors. He comes to point us to Jesus. For who is it, above all, who fails in a cause that will finally succeed—other than the one whose own disciples betrayed, denied, and abandoned him, whose popularity evaporated, who like Purdy died at an early age, who like Arlow is seen as naive and a failure and yet points to something that will finally succeed? John the Baptist may have been in significant ways a failure, but he succeeded in the only thing that finally matters: he lived a life that pointed to Jesus. By the way, that line about failing in a cause that will finally succeed—it wasn’t coined by Bill Arlow. It was the Presbyterian minister Peter Marshall, or maybe the American president Woodrow Wilson. Anyone else want to take the credit? Oh—but we just said it doesn’t matter. Only one thing matters. John the Baptist got that right, and so can we.