

SAMUEL TALKS WITH JOHN THE BAPTIST

Scene 3 from the *Faith in Grey Places*
'Living with conflict' theatre series

by Christine Woolgar

ADVISORY WARNING: None.

PREMISE: The prophet Samuel, now deceased, converses with a series of guests in paradise, reflecting on their past experiences and what it was to live with conflict.

In this, the third scene, he goes to visit John the Baptist, who's chosen to make his dwelling a flat expanse of desert. John wryly recounts the things people say to him when they interrupt his solitude.

LENGTH: ~2,400 words

GENRE: Drama. Duologue.

CHARACTERS:

SAMUEL: The Old Testament prophet, now deceased. Mature, measured, kind.

JOHN THE BAPTIST: The New Testament prophet, now deceased. Thoughtful, introverted, wry.

This sketch was first written in April 2022 as part of a lent series (that I didn't finish until after Easter). I welcome development feedback, particularly from those with an interest in Christian theatre. Please reach out via the blog here: <https://faith.workthegreymatter.com/about/>

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SCENE 3

FLAT DRY DESERT SO FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE. TWO ROWS OF PALM TREES MARK A ROADWAY THROUGH THE DESERT. RUNNING PARALLEL TO EACH TWO OF TREES ARE TWO NARROW STREAMS THAT CAN EASILY BE STEPPED OVER. THE STREAMS GURGLE GENTLY.

LATE AFTERNOON, BUT STILL HOT. JOHN THE BAPTIST BASKS IN THE SHADE OF ONE THE TREES. THERE IS AN EMPTY SEAT NEAR HIM.

ENTER SAMUEL.

SAMUEL: John?

JOHN: (LOOKS UP) Samuel?

SAMUEL: Yes, hello!

JOHN: Welcome! What an unexpected pleasure. Please come and sit in the shade.

SAMUEL: Thank you.

JOHN: Would you like some water?

SAMUEL: Yes please!

JOHN HANDS SAMUEL A FLASK. SAMUEL TAKES SEVERAL LOUD GULPS OF WATER AND SPLASHES SOME MORE OVER HIS FACE.

Thank you.

(PUTS DOWN THE FLASK) In all the time I've been dead, I don't think I've ever felt so close to my embodied experience.

JOHN: Well, you've just walked for four hours in the desert heat.

SAMUEL: (LAUGHS) You're telling me! There was a spring at the start and the Holy Spirit told me to fill my flask. But... (EXHALES)

JOHN: You found the palm shelter at the half-way point, didn't you?

SAMUEL: Yes, yes I did. I just... uh... It reminds you of what it was like to live with scarcity. Do you know what I mean?

JOHN: Yes.

SAMUEL: Was that what you wanted?

JOHN: In part.

SAMUEL: (CHUCKLES) Do you get many visitors?

JOHN: Strangely enough, no. But I like it that way. (SAMUEL LAUGHS)
When I made this place I asked the LORD to create it so that you had to walk a whole day before reaching me. But he said that four hours was enough to make my point.

SAMUEL: (LAUGHS) I do hope I'm not disturbing you.

JOHN: You are very welcome Samuel. (BEAT) So, what do you think of my desert?

SAMUEL: I've never seen an expanse like it—no mountains, no valleys, dry earth and this great long line of palm trees. (BEAT) Oh, and the mirages! It's like you're surrounded by the sea!

Were you inspired by the prophet Isaiah by any chance?

JOHN: But of course. "Make a straight highway in the desert for our God."

SAMUEL: "Every valley must be elevated, and every mountain and hill levelled." It's so flat!

JOHN: Except it's not flat.

SAMUEL: How do you mean?

JOHN: Did you know that the earth is curved?

SAMUEL: (EXHALES) I've heard a few people mention something along those lines, but to be honest, I wasn't really paying attention!

JOHN: So, it turns out, and I only learned this after I died, the earth is like a giant dome.

SAMUEL: Oh, I knew that!

JOHN: And people stand on the surface of the dome.

SAMUEL: What? Don't be— We lived *underneath* the dome.

JOHN: (CALM, MATTER OF FACT) No, no we didn't. The earth is like a dome. Its surface is curved like a dome and we used to live on that curved surface.

SAMUEL: But if that was true... people would... fall off it?

JOHN: Not quite. You see, people on the earth never fell downwards, exactly. Instead they always fell towards the centre of the dome. So the experience of standing on the side of the dome, is much the same as when you're standing on top of the dome. Because wherever you are, up points away from the centre of the dome and down points towards the centre. And it's such a big dome that most of the time you don't even realise the curve is there.

SAMUEL: Are you serious?

JOHN: Well... mostly. It would be more accurate to say the earth is like two domes joined together. So, it's like a sphere, a ball. A globe, if you will.

SAMUEL: Globe?

JOHN: Yes.

SAMUEL: And that's what people mean when they say the earth is round?

JOHN: Yes.

SAMUEL: But... if the earth is round like a ball... that would mean... it has no corners?

JOHN: Correct.

SAMUEL: And that to be under the earth, is really to be *in* the earth.

JOHN: You're getting the hang of it.

SAMUEL: And it would mean that... your horizon is always limited by the curvature of the earth.

JOHN: Exactly! No matter how good your sight is or how high up you are. (BEAT) You remember the spring where you filled up your flask?

SAMUEL: Yes.

JOHN: Can you see it?

SAMUEL: Yes, it's over there. (PAUSE) No wait, that's not the spring, that's the palm shelter. The one I passed when I was half way here. (PAUSE) Are you about to tell me that the palm spring is hidden beyond the horizon?

JOHN: Yes.

SAMUEL: And the mirage isn't getting in the way?

JOHN: No. If you climb one of these trees, you'll see the spring.

SAMUEL: (SLIGHTLY BREATHLESS) That's incredible! (BEAT) How did you find out about this?

JOHN: Ezekiel told me.

SAMUEL: (SAMUEL LAUGHS) I should have guessed.

JOHN: He also explained how mirages work.

SAMUEL: You know, I was going to invite you to visit me but Ezekiel said I should come to you. He said your place was not to be missed.

JOHN: (CHUCKLES) Now you know why.

SAMUEL: But if you'd wanted this place to be properly flat, God would still have done that for you, right?

JOHN: Sure. But if I'd done that, people would miss the point.

SAMUEL: That... what?

JOHN: That our perspective is always limited. (BEAT) So why did you want to meet with me?

SAMUEL: Uh... well, a friend recently asked me if I would rather be a priest or a prophet. I was curious to hear what your answer would be. I mean... you were a prophet, but you came from a family of priests.

JOHN: Like Ezekiel.

SAMUEL: Well, yes.

JOHN: (DRAWS BREATH) I was just about to say that I would never be able to live the life of a priest, and yet... what is a ministry of repentance if not a priestly ministry? Is it possible to be a prophet, without also being a priest? Is it possible to be a priest, without being a prophet? You should ask Peter this question.

SAMUEL: So, you would choose to be both?

JOHN: I don't know about that. (BEAT) I'll tell you for free, I didn't feel like a very good prophet. My second cousin was the Christ, but I never truly realised until he came to me to be baptised.

SAMUEL: But that was how it was meant to be, surely? God was hiding his identity.

JOHN: I know, but... even later on I wasn't sure and had to ask him if he really was the Christ.

SAMUEL: Your circumstances had changed.

JOHN: Yes, but isn't faith is about holding onto hope *even when* your circumstances change?

SAMUEL: Well, I think on some level, we're all leaves blown about by the wind.

JOHN: (CHUCKLES) And there was I thinking we were meant to be pillars of righteousness!

SAMUEL: Your perspective had changed.

JOHN: Yes, I suppose it had.

SAMUEL: You wanted to be sure that everything you'd believed before was consistent with your new facts and circumstances. (BEAT) God doesn't chastise us for asking questions.

JOHN: (GENTLY BUT FIRMLY) I know that. It's all right, I'm not fishing for reassurance.

SAMUEL: Sorry, it sounded like... I've had two conversations recently, both of which got me completely by surprise.

JOHN: Oh? Who with?

SAMUEL: Well, Ezekiel and also Ronit. She was...

JOHN: I know Ronit.

SAMUEL: They're both prophets I have a very high respect for, and yet they both told me they felt like their ministries were failures. I find that a bit staggering.

JOHN: Did you think I was saying the same thing?

SAMUEL: Yes.

JOHN: (PAUSE) To be a prophet is to speak about God's perspective. Do I feel like I failed to do the things God gave me to do? No. Do I feel like I ever had a handle on what God's perspective was? No.

And now that I'm dead, and I know what I know now, it feels like I never had any true comprehension of God's perspective. (BEAT) Now, that's not entirely fair. But it's very easy to feel dwarfed by all the things you don't know.

Some people come here and they say, "What beautiful trees! What beautiful streams in the middle of the desert! It's just like what Isaiah foretold!" or "It's just like what Ezekiel foretold!" And I nod my head and say, "Yes, that's right, though I made a few changes."

And then they quote one of the gospels at me and say, “But it’s what you preached, isn’t it?” And I say, “Well, sort of.”

Then they look around and realise that we’re not in the middle of the rift valley and there is no river Jordan.

SAMUEL: What do they say then?

JOHN: Some of them say they’re not sure they’d really want an earth where there are no mountains or valleys. At which point I say, “Of course not. Isaiah’s prophecy was a metaphor about how God humbles the proud and lifts up the oppressed.” Then they go quiet and smile, and go on their way.

Others ask if the rows of palm trees are an allusion to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

SAMUEL: Are they?

JOHN: Sort of. Then they start a whole discussion about processions and highways and what it might look like when Jesus returns. Will we be in the procession behind him? What exactly will happen? Will all of humanity see it happen simultaneously? And gradually they realise that despite all the prophecies we have, they don’t really know what the second coming will look like.

SAMUEL: And what do other people say?

JOHN: Then we get those who say, “It’s very flat isn’t it?”

SAMUEL: (CHUCKLES) And you tell them the earth is round.

JOHN: Actually, most of them know that already.

SAMUEL: Really?

JOHN: Yes, it’s common knowledge now. The countries of the earth even have different time zones, different clocks. It can be midnight in one place and midday in another. Most people understand this now.

SAMUEL: Except for me.

JOHN: Well, I’m guessing you’ve had other priorities since you died. I wouldn’t worry about it. Ask the Spirit to introduce you to a few people. Or talk to Ezekiel again. He’ll happily give you a dozen lectures in cosmology.

SAMUEL: (CHUCKLES) I don’t doubt it.

JOHN: He’ll also tell you the earth is not a sphere, it’s an ellipsoid.

SAMUEL: Thanks for the warning. (BEAT) So, when someone comments on how flat everything is here, how do you usually respond?

JOHN: I say, "Have you heard of Machaerus?"

SAMUEL: That was the... er... fortress where you were imprisoned.

JOHN: That's right. Most of them haven't heard of it.

SAMUEL: Because it's not mentioned in the New Testament.

JOHN: Exactly. So I explain to them that Machaerus was a palace and fortress on top of a very tall hill in the middle of nowhere, east of the Dead Sea. And then I say to them, "This fortress was built because its vantage point allowed you to see a long way east and any potential invasion. And it has high slopes, so it was difficult to attack.

"And yet, despite all of this planning and effort, the greatest limitation on what people could see from that fortress was the curvature of the earth. And that curve is so slight they didn't even notice it was there."

SAMUEL: (CHUCKLES) It's like how everyone focusses on their political rivals, little realising just how big God is.

JOHN: Exactly. Then my guests say, "So did you make this place as a parable to demonstrate the greatness of God?" And I say, "Yes. Yes, I did."

SAMUEL: (CHUCKLES) And there was I thinking it was all about the streams in the desert.

JOHN: Well... prophecies can have more than one meaning.

SAMUEL: (LOOKS UP) The mirage is fading.

JOHN: (LIKE IT'S OBVIOUS) The ground is cooling.

SAMUEL: Is that what causes them?

JOHN: A mirage is light from the sky that comes towards the earth and then gets bent back upwards by hot air near the ground. So when the light comes meets our eyes, it looks like a piece of the sky is on the ground.

SAMUEL: And if the sky is blue, it looks like water. Or a reflection of the sky on water.

JOHN: You're a fast study.

SAMUEL: I always thought mirages were a parable to teach us about false prophecy.

JOHN: Oh, for sure they are.

SAMUEL: Is that another parable you wanted your guests to see?

PAUSE.

JOHN: Sort of.

PAUSE.

When I grew up I always thought that battles were about armies and soldiers, chariots and swords and arrows. But war is just as much about what we believe.

I realised that every war has its mirages and they're used as weapons. False stories, false hopes. The misdirection of hope; the misdirection of fear.

And it takes deep understanding not just to recognise that a lie is a lie, but to know how it works and where it gets its power from.

SAMUEL: Especially when your own perspective is limited.

JOHN: Exactly.

PAUSE.

SAMUEL: Did you have to fight mirages when you were in Machaerus?

JOHN: Every day.

LONG PAUSE

But you know, when people come to you and they tell you this Jesus fellow is healing the sick and raising the dead... And when a man you'd met before, who you knew had been blind, walks into your cell and says he can see now because of Jesus... you know it's no illusion.

SAMUEL: Do your old friends and disciples come and visit you?

JOHN: Yes. They're good people.

SAMUEL: I'm glad.

JOHN: You don't need to worry about me. I don't like being isolated, but I do enjoy solitude.

SAMUEL: So you like it here?

JOHN: Yes.

SAMUEL: I'm not sure I could take the heat every day.

JOHN: Ah, but you've not seen the moon yet. If you sit here a little while longer and you'll see it rise.

PAUSE.

SAMUEL: So if the world is a ball, does the moon go around the earth?

JOHN: (CHUCKLES) Yes. But that's not what makes it rise. If you want, I can explain it to you.

SAMUEL: So long as I won't outstay my welcome.

JOHN: Little chance of that.