

“I Am Not...”

John 1:19-28

Who are you? That can sometimes be a hard question to answer? Who ARE you? Not just your name, but your identity. Not just your title, or your job, or your family. But much broader. Who are you? Many people would struggle to give an answer.

As I think about that question, I realize that this past month has been very interesting and even a bit confusing for me, because for a whole year, I had to be very careful about my identity—at least my permanent identity. I was your interim pastor, and honestly, that was fine. I worked at preserving that identity for the first six months I was here, always emphasizing the six month limitation with which I came to Mount Airy. And then for another six months I waited while you as a church, and then our presbytery, went through the whole process of deciding whether or not to call me permanently. And that finally happened, a month ago now. But now we have to wait another month for an installation date because of scheduling issues. And this slow-motion transition continues, even as I try to sell my house in Atlanta and look for a house to buy here in Mt. Airy.

So who am I? Well, I am your pastor. I like saying that. I like being able to have some confidence and security in saying that. But it's not yet fully accomplished, either in terms of the formality of an installation service or in the personal reality of my wife and settling here together in our own house. So who am I? That's still a good question to ask, and a good question for me to try to answer.

In that context, I understand John's perspective when he was asked that question, because John's answer about his own identity needed to be an answer that directed everyone's attention

to someone else, namely Jesus. Ultimately, I would always want to answer that question about myself in the same way. So an answer I often give is simply to say, “I am an instrument.”

Instruments are important, aren't they? If you go to a surgeon, you need to be sure that he has the best instruments. The sharpest scalpel, the cleanest tools possible, perfectly sterile, perfectly designed for the specific surgery at hand. But still, isn't the surgeon himself far more important?

That's the point for me, in terms of my own identity. I'm just the instrument that God might choose to use. God is the surgeon.

Who am I? Well, I am your pastor. Or still, more technically, your pastor-elect. But as good as it is for me to take away that qualifying word “interim,” still the focus of my identity as a pastor is not upon me at all. So in 1 Peter 5, when Peter identifies himself as an elder and a shepherd or pastor, he identifies Jesus as the “Chief Shepherd.” The chief pastor. We often use that passage to describe all other shepherds as undershepherds. That's helpful. And John the Baptist gives us some helpful answers as well when he was asked about his identity.

When John was asked, “Who are you?”, he had to begin with explaining who he was not. And that's where I'll begin this morning. The first point is point is put in the negative,

I. JOHN IS NOT...

v.19

v.20

Next question

v.21

At that point, of course, the Jewish leaders were pretty much confused, if not thoroughly aggravated.

v.22

It is very helpful to understand why those particular questions were asked in the first place, because the questions reveal a great deal about God's revelation in preparation for Jesus. The questions, understanding why they were asked, really help us understand not only John's answers, but more importantly, they help us understand Jesus all the more fully. And that's the goal, knowing Jesus. Understanding Jesus, and understanding the ways in which God so perfectly prepared the way for Jesus to come in the flesh.

So first of all, John is not...

A. Elijah.

Why the question? Why did they even think he was Elijah?

Easy answer, the prophecy of Malachi. It's a prophecy found in the very last words of the OT, the very last words of prophecy which the people of Israel had received from the mouth of God 400 years earlier. And God has been silent for those 400 years. No intervening prophets, no further words from God. This is how the Jewish prophets of the Old Testament ended, with these words,

Mal. 4:5 "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. 6 And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

That seems plain enough. The Jews expected the same Elijah who had been taken up to be with the Lord in the flesh,

without death, would return to the mortality of his old flesh, giving up the glorified body he enjoyed in the eternal presence of God. In a certain way, that made sense.

2 King 2:10 "So he said, "You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so." 11 Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven."

So the Jews were expecting Elijah to come back. "Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD."

But John was not Elijah, not in any literal sense, not as these Jews conceived of it. Yet very interestingly, Scripture does tell us that John was the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Matt. 11:11 "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. 13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. 14 And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. 15 He who has ears, let him hear."

And,

Matt. 17:10 "And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" 11 Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. 12 "But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their

hands." 13 Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist."

And we are given a very plain explanation about Elijah's identity.

Luke 1:13 "But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

So John came in the spirit and power of Elijah, but he would not be exalted as Elijah. He was not Elijah returned to the flesh, and would accept no praise for the greatness of that prophet. "I am not Elijah."

Secondly, John has to proclaim, "I am not..."

B. The promised prophet.

v.21b "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."

Again, clear OT prophecy,

Deut. 18:15 "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him...18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him."

The prophet like unto Moses, who was, of course, Jesus. Not John. John was not the one in whom the revelation of God would come in the flesh, he was the last of the OT prophets, to be sure. But he was not the final prophet who is described with these words,

Heb. 1:1 "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they."

That is not John, but Jesus, the final prophet with the final word of God's own revelation. But he was coming. And that's John's ministry, declaring the one who is to come after him. John's whole purpose was to point to Jesus, to prepare the way for Jesus. He was an instrument, nothing more. But of course, nothing less either! Remember God's words, "Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist."

So John knew his place, his position, his identity. And his message was clear.

v.27

So John is not Elijah. He is not the promised prophet, in the line of Moses. And most certainly, he is not...

C. The Christ.

That was his first response, his first answer to the question,

“Who are you?”

v.20

Please always understand the meaning of the words in the different languages used here. Christ is a Greek word, meaning “anointed.” The Hebrew word is Messiah. The Anointed One. And Messiah would come to Israel. That was the hope and expectation of the Jews. Messiah would be their king, their savior. Never is the work and identity of the Messiah clearer than in,

Ps. 2:1 “Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.” 4 He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision. 5 Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure: 6 “Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion.” 7 “I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. 8 Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

That’s who the Jews were waiting for! The Messiah. The Christ. And that’s who was coming. “The great and dreadful day of the LORD” was the day of the Christ. The day of Jesus incarnation. And that makes John’s purpose all the more clear. It makes his identity all the more certain. He was a voice of preparation. He was

Again,

Luke 1: 16 “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to

the Lord their God. 17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

II. John is...

A voice of preparation. Then the question becomes, what is the necessary preparation for the coming of Jesus? What is the preparation needed for Jesus?

There really is an easy answer to that question. In a word, the answer is repentance. Matthew’s gospel makes that especially clear,

Mat. 3:1 “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” 3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.”

John’s gospel,

v.23

That comes from Isaiah 40, and it is a prophecy of salvation, that which came with Jesus.

Is. 40:1 “Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Says your God. 2 “Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the Lord’s hand Double for all her sins.” 3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth; 5 The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

What does that mean? Repent, confess your sin and turn from it. Turn away from the rebellious, stubbornness by which we refuse to love and serve God. John is...

A. A voice of preparation calling for repentance.

Isaiah 40 speaks of a highway in the desert that must be made straight. It speaks of the mountains being brought low and the valleys raised up. In other words, all obstacles that would separate man and God must be removed. All sin must be turned away from and cast off. Those crooked paths, on which we often travel, and on which the people of Israel literally stumbled through their experiences in the desert, through crooked ways need to be straightened out.

We still use that expression to mean the same thing, don't we? "He really needs to get his life straightened out." "She needs to learn to think straight."

Those sentences are very clear in their meaning, I believe. To make straight the way for the Lord is to turn from sin in repentance. And that is a call that we must keep before us all the time. So let me ask you, let me challenge you, what are the crooked paths in your life? What are the mountains that form a barrier between you and God. What are the valleys that would be the pitfalls of sin into which you stumble and fall? What is the sin in your life that is an obstacle in your relationship to God? Whatever it is, hear this word of preparation.

Please don't let this message pass you by this morning. If there is an obstacle, a sin, that stands between you and God, then turn away from that sin. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight the way of the Lord!

You see, my job today is the same as John's. My message is

the same as his. It is not a message of condemnation, but invitation. There is condemnation, to be sure, to those who reject the message. There is condemnation to those whose hearts are hardened. But the message to repent is not at all the message of judgment, but rather an invitation to escape that judgment!

So if you are not a Christian, if you have not given your life to Jesus, if you remain dead in your sins and separated from God because of those sins, then "make straight the way of the Lord." If you are a Christian, if you profess your faith in Jesus, then renew that commitment even this day. Make straight the way of the Lord. Make straight your ways, your life, by repentance. Turning from sin, that you might now the promised forgiveness of those sins.

That's the point. That's the message of John. That's the necessary preparation for Jesus. For John is...

B. A voice of preparation calling for faith in Jesus.

That's why the reference to baptism.

v.24-28

Baptism means washing. So you who confess your sins, you who feel dirty because of your sins, you who are dirty because of your sins, let me proclaim to you that Jesus washes away those sins. And that's the meaning of John's outward act of baptism. The call to repentance is nothing less than the invitation to be washed!

So just like John, I am an instrument. I am a voice crying in the wilderness.

Acts 3:19 "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, 20 and that He may send Jesus Christ, who

was preached to you before, 21 whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.”

So just a brief introduction to next time,
v.29

He is the one to whom I point you. It's all about him, Jesus. Are you living with sin today? Are you trying to have it both ways, professing to love Jesus but also loving the rebellion of your sins? If so, confess those sins, with godly sorrow and sincere grief. Where you struggle with sin, where sin consistently tempts you, and especially where you give in to that sin in your daily lives, turn away from that sin. Turn to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Turn to Jesus with faith, trusting in his death to be the sacrifice required to satisfy God's own wrath and judgment which your sin deserves. Turn to Jesus whose promise is not only to forgive you your sin but to wash you, to cleanse you from your unrighteousness.

It is a message of comfort. And encouragement.

Is. 40:1 “Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Says your God. 2 “Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned...3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord.”

As I serve as an instrument today, an instrument by whom and through whom the Lord would speak to you, listen well. In your own heart, in your own life, prepare the way of the Lord.