

**Third Sunday of Advent**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**17 December 2023**

**John 1:6-8, 19-28**

The two questions the priests and Levites ask John the Baptist today point to the issue of identity. They ask, "Who are you?" The second question in our passage, asked by the Pharisees, points to the question of vocation. They ask, "Why do you baptize?" The first two verses of our passage are still part of the prologue to the Gospel of John. The prologue contains two different themes: The narrator's testimony about Jesus of Nazareth as the Word of God who was from the beginning with God because he himself was God. The second theme is the testimony of John the Baptist about Jesus, the light of the world who comes to dwell with humanity. John is the one who came as a witness to this light in fulfillment of the scriptures.

The first question, "Who are you?" which comes to us in verses 6-8 comes from a group of priests and Levites who came from Jerusalem to inquire further about John's ministry. John had caused a stir in an age filled with Messianic expectation, when many were expecting the coming of the announced Messiah. Many were coming to him from various places to listen to his call for repentance and to be baptized by him. In fact, he was so popular that Luke records in his Gospel how people were wondering whether John was the Christ (Messiah).

Their question is an important one and there is a reason why all the Gospels document this passage in their own way. There were some in the age of the Gospels (70-90 CE) who still considered John the Baptist a great moral teacher, and who still wondered if he had been the Messiah. Many of these folks had not heard about Jesus of Nazareth. We know for example that Paul met a group of these disciples of the Baptizer when he arrived in Ephesus in the year 52. Paul instructed them in the ways of Jesus and they became disciples. So, perhaps during the time of the Gospel of John there were still people who needed to hear the answer to the question "Who are YOU?" from John the Baptizer himself.

This is a question of identity and the Baptizer knew exactly what they were asking him. He answers, "I am NOT the Messiah!" They pressed on, "Who are you then, are you Elijah?" to which he answered, "I am not!" Now, this second answer is a bit tricky because even Jesus himself says later on that Elijah had arrived but people did not recognize him, referring to John. So, was the Baptizer right or was Jesus right? The answer is that both are right. Technically speaking, John is not Elijah. He is not the prophet of old, somehow reincarnated. He is not the prophet

who walked the earth in the ninth century before Jesus. But Jesus was right too. The Baptizer was the Elijah type announced by the prophet Malachi 3:1, “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” Or more specifically, Malachi 4:5, “I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” In fact, the Gospels do a great job at comparing the Baptizer to Elijah: They dress alike, they have the same diet, they are both wilderness prophets, where were both quite charismatic, etc.

These two groups press on, “Are you the Prophet then?” Here we may ask, “What prophet are they referring to?” There was much speculation in those days, especially in the Dead Sea community, that there would be two Messiahs: One of these Messiahs would be the descendant of David announced by prophecy. He would be a political deliverer, a warrior, an avenger, a military hero who would triumph by force against their historical enemies. The second Messiah would be a suffering priestly Messiah, who would fulfil the prophesies of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. He would take on the nation’s sin to satisfy God’s righteousness and obtain forgiveness for the nation. The one who “by his wounds Israel would be healed.” (See Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53:12.) They were calling this second Messiah, “The Prophet” during the times of Jesus. The baptizer denies being this figure as well, but he does answer the question of identity. He tells them who he is, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” He fulfills Isaiah 40 and Malachi. He prepares the ways for the Lord. That is his identity.

After the priests and Levites, the Pharisees, who are also watching carefully what the Baptizer does, jump in. They ask, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” This is a vocational question. They ask, “What is your job? Why do you do what you do?” In a real way, both groups are wondering how much trouble John the Baptizer is going to be for Israel. These are dangerous times. The Zealots are beginning to talk about armed conflict against Rome. They wonder if John is one of those apocalyptic preachers who will call for violence against the empire. They want to know if he is the one to arm Israel and lead her into battle. John answers them about his vocation, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

He is not the light, but he came to testify about the light and to point to it. He is not the Messiah, but he came to prepare the way for the Messiah. He is not the freedom the world awaits, but he is here to point to that freedom. Not the Savior, but he is here to point to that Savior. He is not the one destined of old to unfreeze

the world and to replace hearts of stone with hearts of flesh, to liberate people from the sin that keeps them locked in their own desperation. He is not the one sent to break the chains of sin and addiction; to provide freedom from shame, guilt, and doubt; and to lead people into a life filled with grace and hope.

His is a baptism of repentance in preparation for the true baptism of Christ. John knows that there is a Messiah, and he knows he is not him. His vocation is to be a traffic sign, a flashing arrow pointing to the one. His job is to help people find Jesus and then to get out of the way. He knows that he needs to decrease, so Jesus might increase. What great example he gives us! We live in an era of hero worship. Many pastors are so polished in everything they do and say that they place themselves at the center of their message. The spotlight shines on them. They are the purveyors of hope and the entertainers of the masses. But, at best, pastors are called to be traffic signs, pointing the way to the Messiah. We are not the Messiah, regardless of how polished our message is, how attractive our buildings, how expensive our communication systems, how impressive our choirs, how entertaining our sermons, and how comforting our message. We are not the Savior. It is not us people are coming to see. Without Christ there is nothing of substance we can give the world. Christ is the one people are coming to see.

But lest I leave any of you off the hook, let me tell you that behind every person who must be everything to everybody, every time, and in every place there is a Messiah complex in hiding. Many of us become such fixers of other people's problems that we take on the place of the Messiah. We become the center of attention and the only source of comfort or help. We become co-dependent on those we help. Let me repeat that our job as Christians is to point the way through our service. To lead others to the only answer to their pain through our love. Christ is the only source of hope and the only fountain of recovery, restoration, and life. Our job is to show the way and point to the Savior, and then get out of the way. Our vocation, however, is to be messengers. Without us many would never hear about the Gospel of Salvation. But it is not our message we deliver, but his message. It is not our baptism we offer, but his baptism. It is not our salvation we offer, but his. We must deliver the message of his love to others who need to hear it. It is all about him. May he continue to bless you. Amen!