

# Who are you?

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## December 14, 2008 Third Sunday of Advent

### Lectionary citations

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126 or Luke 1:47-55

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Yesterday, I was listening to the comedy radio program “Whad’Ya Know” on NPR. During the “Thanks for the Memos” segment, the host read a letter from a listener that suggested the host change his strategy for interviewing audience members. The host usually asks, “What do you do in life as we know it?” or some variation on that theme. The listener suggested the host adopt the practice prescribed by “Miss Manners” for making conversation with stranger and ask, “What are some of your interests?”

This dialogue reminded me of the times I have been unemployed. My greatest stress came not from the financial uncertainty, but from the uncertainty about my identity. I was no longer the branch manager for a training company. I was just some unemployed guy, desperate to find a job. When I took the first job that I was offered, I remember saying that I should take the job because I could be proud to tell people I worked at Ranken Technical College. I remember saying that, and taking the job, even though I had doubts over whether I would really fit in there.

The listener thought the question “What do you do?” was rude. The question the religious leaders asked John, “Who are you?” was even more rude. Asking, “Who are you?” can be aggressive and confrontational, maybe even hostile. The one asking you, “Who are you?” may have some doubts about you, may be thinking that you are not what you seem to be.

The Jews answered the question “Who are you?” by a person’s trade—were they a fisherman, a tax collector, a priest—but also on who their parents were. A big part of a person’s identity was their family background. Remember in the Gospel of Mark, when the folks in Jesus’ hometown felt that he was “taking on airs,” they put him in his place by saying,

*“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. (Mark 6:2b-3)*

John the Baptist actually had a better claim than Jesus did to be a spiritual leader. According to Luke’s Gospel, John’s father was a priest. John was born to be a priest. However, John was not acting like a priest. John looked like a prophet and spoke like a prophet. Yet the religious authorities were still not sure who he was.

John's answer is to say who he is not. John tells them that he is not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet. The authorities reply that he has told them who he is not, but they on insist on knowing who he is. John replies that he is the one who prepares the way for someone who is coming, someone much greater. The authorities seem puzzled by this response. If John is not anyone important, then why does he think he has the authority to baptize anyone? John again replies that his baptism by water is preparing the way for someone much greater than he.

Dr. John J. Pilch described their concern in terms that we can identify with from our recent political season: was he an "oracular prophet," a prophet who "pronounces words of redemption or judgment," or was he an "action prophet," a prophet who leads a popular movement hoping that God will intervene in liberating action." In other words, was he just going to talk about change, or was he going to do something to make change happen?

The religious authorities appear satisfied that John is not a threat to their institutions and programs, and leave him alone to preach and baptize. They left with few worries about John. However, they might have left wondering about how they would deal with this one for whom John was preparing. However, as far as John was concerned, he was just another big talker.

I think they were wrong about John. His baptism of repentance was a threat to the establishment. The King finds John's words of judgment threatening enough to have John put in prison and beheaded. Later, when Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew asks them, the religious leaders fear the popular reaction to any criticism of John.

*"John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." (Matthew 21:25-27a)*

I know that I can learn a lot from John the Baptist about how to define who I am. When I was unemployed and I met people and they asked me "what do you do?" I struggled to formulate an answer. I had done a lot of things, but right then, in my mind, I was not doing anything. I was still a father and a husband, and a member of my church, but I still felt that I was not doing anything of value and that I was therefore of no value myself. This was despite all my education, ability, and experience!

Because I was a Christian, I seriously considered answering, "What do you do?" with "I love Jesus and spread the Gospel" but could not bring myself to say it. After all, I was not paid to love Jesus and spread the Gospel! Besides that, I wasn't especially good at evangelizing and as an unemployed person, I didn't see myself as a great role model for the good Christian life. Get me a job first, and then I can have the confidence to spread the Gospel!

What I need to learn from John is that the answer to the question "Who are you?" does not come from my job or my family background. It comes from my relationship with Jesus. That is how John defined who he was. John knew who he was not—he was not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet. He knew that

in himself, he was nothing special. However, he knew that someone was coming, someone who he had not yet met, yet he had already give his life to that someone.

Jesus came on Christmas. Jesus is coming again in glory. Jesus is coming. Jesus is already here. As John said, "But among you stands one you do not know." Jesus stands among us, even if we do not always know him. Let what we do, what we are interested in, and who we are all be defined by our relationship with him. Christmas is coming. "Make straight the way for the Lord." Amen.

Commentary John J. Pilch of Georgetown University retrieved from  
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