

Advent 3B, 2008

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

Title: Who are you?

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Who are you? How would you answer that question?

You could begin with your name. That's always good for a start. But where do you go from there? You could say that you're someone's wife or husband. Someone's father or mother. Someone's son or daughter. You could also name your profession. Where you lived. Where you're originally from. And then there's your accomplishments. What you've done. The degrees that you've earned. Various awards and prizes. If you were to put together your resume, what would you highlight?

Who are you, really? If you had to introduce yourself to a complete stranger, where would you begin?

Who are you? This is the question the Pharisees had for John.

John was strange. There is no getting around out it. John was the king of the outcasts, the ultimate outsider. John was different, unique, one of a kind. There was no mistaking him for someone else.

It had been so since birth. John, you remember, was born to Zachariah and Elizabeth when they were both very old. They had given up hope of ever having kids. But then an angel appeared to Zachariah and told him that his prayers had been and he was finally going to be a father.

When I was on vicarage, I tried to explain to a Sunday school class what a miracle John's birth was. I told them that it would be like if their grandmother were to have a kid. To which one of the students replied, "I don't think my grandma has any kids." The Lord's miracles are beyond our imagination.

So John was unusual from birth. He must have gotten strange looks in the playground. I'm sure he had to explain more than once, no, that's not my grandma, that's my mom.

Last week we heard about John's unusual lifestyle and diet. He lived in the wilderness. Since His parents were so old when he was born, it's likely that John became an orphan at a young age. His father, Zachariah, was a priest. This means that John was qualified to be a priest, too. But instead of wearing the priestly robes and serving in the temple in Jerusalem, he wore a robe of camel's hair and lived in the wilderness.

Priests were able to eat the meat from the animals offered in the temple, and a portion of the grain offerings, too. They were entitled to some of the best food in all of Israel. Instead, John eats locusts and wild honey. He's a scavenger, living off the land.

This was just strange. The folks in Jerusalem could not understand it. He wasn't acting like a priest. He wasn't even acting like a normal, civilized person. It seemed to them that He had walked right out of the pages of the Old Testament.

And so they come right out and ask Him, "Who are you?"

And then John does something even more strange. Even more unusual. He refuses to talk about himself. He doesn't say, well, I'm John, son of Zachariah and Elizabeth. I grew up in the hill country of Judah. No. He begins by explain who he isn't.

"I am not the Christ," the Messiah, the promised one, says John. He confesses. He does not deny, but confesses that he is not the one.

So the folks from Jerusalem start going down the list:

- Are you Elijah? Nope
- Are you the Prophet? Nope

Who are you? What do we tell those who sent us?

So next John gives them a Bible verse. This is who I am. The prophet Isaiah says it (it's not something I made up or created for myself): A voice crying in the wilderness, make straight the Lord's road. Who am I? I am a voice. I'm only good for my words. The Lord sent me, and so I do what I've been sent to do.

The folks in Jerusalem are even more confused. Then what's with the baptizing? They ask. Once again, John does not draw attention to himself. Instead he points to Christ. Christ is coming and if you think I'm strange, wait until you meet him. I'm not even worthy to be His butler.

Who are you? When John is asked this question, He resists every urge to talk about Himself. He's not the Messiah, he's not even close. He's just a messenger. But He can't stop talking about Jesus. Just wait until Jesus comes. He's the Lamb of God. He will baptize you with fire. I'm not even worthy to take off His shoes.

Who are you?

From the looks of things, you're just as strange as John the Baptist. Here it is, Sunday morning. You could be in your nice warm house, instead, you went out in the cold, and are shivering here in church. You could be laying in bed, but you're sitting on a hard pew. You could be dressed in pajamas right now, but instead you're wearing your nicest clothes. You could be eating a late brunch, but instead, you come to eat a small piece of bread and sip of wine. You could be reading the Sunday paper or watching TV, but instead you're listening to someone read you a book that was written two thousand years ago.

You're strange. You're different. And people will notice. So what do you say when people are taken aback? What do you say when people ask, "Who are you?"

You could talk about yourself. You could make your faith all about you and your decisions. You could talk about what you've done and make things like going to church and helping others out as all about you.

The other option is to pull a John the Baptist, and talk about Jesus. You are who you are, not because you chose to be, but because that's how God made you. His love transforms you and makes you different. And so all you can do is talk about Him.

Our gospel says about John that He was a witness who testified about the light. Witness. Testimony. Makes you think about court, right? Witnesses are only good as far as their testimony. The focus is not usually on who the witness is, but what they've seen and heard. What have you seen? What have you heard? What has the Lord done for you?

It's Advent and Christmas is coming. This Christmas you will meet plenty of people who think you're strange. People who know that you live your life differently than they do. People who know you have a different perspective on things. These people may be your coworkers at the office Christmas party. These may be your nieces and nephews come in from out of town. It may be your own kids, grandkids, or even your spouse.

Don't let this opportunity pass you by. It's your turn to witness, just like John. And don't worry, you don't need to talk about yourself. Instead, it's all about Jesus and what He's done. He came to earth to be one of us. He bore our sins and died in our place. He rose from the dead, conquering sin, death and the devil, and He's coming back to take us home. You can do that, right?

Who are you?

You are baptized, clothed with Christ, you bear His name.

Who are you?

You are a forgiven sinner who relies on the grace of God.

Who are you?

You are a holy person, sanctified by the blood of Christ.

Who are you?

You are member of the body of Christ. Part of a community. Christ is now present on earth through you.

You are called to be witnesses. Not everyone will believe your testimony. Not everyone will be convinced. Not everyone believed John, either. He remained an outcast. But he remained faithful. He continued to testify and proclaim God's message. And eventually it got him killed. But many did believe John. The Lord worked through John to call many people to repentance and to prepare them to receive Him.

He can use you, too. You might just be strange enough.