Who Are You?

Advent 4 T John 1:19-28

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Last week, John the Baptist was in prison. This week, John the Baptist gives us an answer to a very important question. It’s a question that’s being asked a lot now-a-days and it seems like everyone has a different way to answer. But as a Christian, we have one way to answer the question – and John shows us how. The question is this: ***who are you?***

 That was the question that the Pharisees were inquiring of John the Baptist – who was he? Was he anyone important? Should we drop everything and follow him? Does he have any power? He certainly has influence, people are coming out to be baptized by him – is he sent by God? Or is he some crazy kook playing around in the Jordan River?

 I think the Pharisees hoped for the later – that John was some crazy person. Because if he was sent by God, they’ll have to start thinking about following John! They’d have to give up their religious positions, their pride, repent of their sins located deep in their hardened hearts, and follow someone else.

John begins by confessing – **“I am not the Christ.”** I am not the Messiah that God promised to save His people. Okay clear enough. Then they ask, **“are you Elijah?”** Because a prophet like Elijah was promised to come before the Advent of the Christ. But John humbly said, **“no”**. John’s not giving them much, so they ask **“are you the prophet?”** But John said that he wasn’t the prophet promised in Deuteronomy 18 – a prophet like Moses, a law-giver like Moses, one who leads God’s people to the Promised Land like Moses. If John confessed to being any of these 3 promised ones from the Old Testament, they should rejoice and follow him!

John could’ve claimed to be any of these three Old Testament figures and had the backing of the religious elite. John knew he had an opportunity to seize power, fame, recognition – perhaps he could have been dining at the table of kings instead of remaining in the wilderness with His locust and honey diet. But that would make what John’s doing about John. But none of this is about John the Baptist. John knew that. That’s why he let the opportunity go.

Frustrated, those sent by the Pharisees had to get some positive confirmation of who this guy was – so tell us, who are you??

When we’re asked that question, our first instinct is to talk about ourselves. “*I’m Joshua and I’m a vegetarian, humanitarian. I help the poor and needy. I enjoy reading novels and watching sports. My hobbies are disc golf…*” and so on. Most people like to talk about themselves. It’s easier. It’s undisciplined. It makes us feel good to have others be impressed with us or have them look up to us for some impressive thing we’ve told them. Or, perhaps we talk about our troubles not looking for help or prayer from them, or help from God, but we just seek sympathy from them. Ultimately, our bumbling lips reveal to our ears what the heart knows and feels – we’re self-absorbed. In some ways it’s worse than others, but original sin’s curse has all people turned inward towards themselves – filled with self-absorption and pride.

We’re self-absorbed and that effects our relationship with God. It comes out in various ways – unfaithful in prayer and hearing the Lord’s voice through Bible reading. Neglecting the gathering in the house of the Lord because one doesn’t like the style, the people who gather there, or the service time interferes with their work and social life. Coming to church, but finding any and every reason to be distracted from the Lord’s service through Word and Sacrament. Not following God’s Law because it doesn’t seem practical, expedient, or beneficial in today’s world. All such excuses begin with something we all have: a self-absorbed heart.

That was the Pharisee’s problem – they were self-absorbed. They wanted to be the leaders, not being lead. They wanted to be looked up to, not look to another. They wanted to have disciples, not be disciples. They wanted to be the voice, not listen to the voice.

And that leads us to who John the Baptist said he was. He showed who he was by citing Scripture. He let the prophet Isaiah inform the Pharisees who John was – **“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”** John was no one special. He was just a voice. He admitted it. John didn’t talk about Himself. He pointed to one greater than Himself.

John was the voice that prepared the hearts of God’s people to receive Jesus. Unfortunately, as the Gospels reveal, the Pharisees rejected the voice in the wilderness. They rejected John’s voice which preached repentance. Therefore, they rejected God’s voice. John’s voice was supposed to be ***for*** the Pharisees. God’s path into the hearts of the Pharisees, and us, is to be made straight. But their hearts were stubborn. Self-absorbed. They rejected the coming Messiah. Being good Jews, they may have said the right things that they should have, but their actions showed what plagued their hearts – pride.

John’s role was this: he announced the coming of Jesus and preached repentance. Make straight the way of the Lord. The way of the Lord leads into the hearts of men and women – the very hearts which God has come to cleanse and occupy with His presence. The Lord will not take a crooked path to get to the hearts of sinners. He will not climb the mountains that we’ve built around our heart. He will not descend into the valley to come into unprepared hearts and life situations that’re wildly marred with unregretted immorality. He doesn’t beg people to take Him. He’s not satisfied with half-repentance – where we’re only sorry for some of our sins but not for others. The voice whom He sends through His messengers insist that you die to yourself – your desires, your excuses, your self-absorption.

The Pharisees are a good example – they couldn’t die to themselves. Their pride got in the way. They hardened their hearts to the Lord because they didn’t want to change. They didn’t really want the Lord to have access to their hearts. They thought they did. They even sounded like they did. But their actions voiced their heart’s desires – they were against God.

In some ways, we’re like the Pharisees. Our hearts feel the tension of following the Lord faithfully vs. following the sinful world and fleshly desires. That happened to them, and it happens to us. At times we neglect prayer, Scripture, church, and Godly living because we’re afraid of what we’ll find. But there’s one difference between Christians and the Pharisees: they refused to repent. They wouldn’t turn from their sin. They rejected God’s voice. They rejected God’s will. They rejected the preparation for the coming Messiah. True Christians confess their sins, turn from their sins, and follow Jesus. They hear John’s voice, and by extension, the Lord’s voice. They receive baptism. They receive Christ’s body and blood. By that, they receive the forgiveness of sins won from the cross. The very same cross that John’s voice prepared the way for.

John was truly Christian in this way. He was content to simply announce the coming of Jesus. He didn’t request anything of Himself. Rather, he always pointed to the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He was lead to reject power, authority, and fame to the point where he says later in John’s Gospel, **“[Jesus] must increase, and I must decrease!”** John was not about Himself. He was about Jesus.

The Pharisees thought there was something great about John – He did baptisms. And that should indicate something great about himself – that he was either the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet who was to come. But who was John? He said, **“I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know.”** John humbly confessed what he was there to do. His baptisms were with water. He’s just a man pouring water. But the one who is among the Pharisees, and among us now, is the one who baptizes with words and water – a baptism that’s instituted and set up so Christ may baptize us, that He may send His Spirit to cleanse the hearts of the baptized.

So back to the question, **“who are you?”** John’s answer? I’m no one. But let me tell you about the one who’s to come. What’s your answer? Who are you?

In the Church, the talk isn’t about us. It’s always about another. The talk is always about the one whose sandals aren’t worthy for us to untie. It’s about the one who’s infinitely greater than us – the one who’s hands have made us all in our mother’s womb. Not only did He create us, but he redeemed us – with His holy precious blood. He’s bought us from Satan and has saved us from ourselves. He’s washed us clean in our baptismal waters. He’s made us a new creation with a new heart, new desires, new joys. That’s why the talk is always about Him. Because without Him, we’re nothing.

So answering the question, **“Who are you”** outside of talking about Jesus, outside of talking about who God has made you to be, robs Christ of His glory and seeks an identity that’s defined by you, and not God. Be like John – let God define you, give you identity and purpose. For He’s claimed you for Himself – so don’t harden your heart to Him.

This is especially difficult this time of year to talk first about who we are in Jesus. Because in a time of the year where we’re often focused on ourselves – our presents, what we look like to our families, and wanting the family Christmas get together to be perfect. In search for these momentary joys, Christ seems to get lost in the fray. Who are you?

We’re tempted to define ourselves by the joys of the sinful flesh, but John teaches us that God defines us by the joy of the Church and the joy of each our lives. He defines us and gives us identity by the Immanuel – the God with us who comes to prepared hearts to give forgiveness. This brings us joy, a joy that far surpasses the fast-fleeting things of this life. For Christ is in our midst to put to death our sinful hearts and raise us up to life in him through the forgiveness of sins. Let us rejoice, for the Savior is here! Come Lord Jesus, Come quickly.

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