

Who Are You?

The Reverend Deborah Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The Third Sunday of Advent, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary
December 14, 2008

Who are you? they asked. What is your mission, what is your identity? Are you who they say you are, or are you someone else?

Inquiring minds want to know.

We know little of the early life story of John the Baptist. In the gospel of Luke, we hear the story of the angel foretelling his birth to his father Zechariah. Zechariah was confused—he and his wife Elizabeth were too old for children, weren't they? But the angel insisted, and because Zechariah questioned the word of the Lord, he was struck mute until John was born and named. John, Zechariah was told—and later proclaimed—was to make a people ready for the Lord, to be a prophet of the Most High. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit from even before his birth, and turn the hearts of the people of Israel to God.

But all those prophecies were spoken a long time ago, and people forget (or die off). Tradition and scripture hold that John lived in desert, in the wilderness, until he began his ministry. That sort of kept him out of sight—and perhaps out of mind—to those who may have still been around to tell the story of his birth. Not to mention that living in the wilderness was not exactly the norm. He didn't blend in, didn't fit in with 'regular' society. He dressed differently, ate differently, and experienced God differently. His was not the faith tied to temple worship, to priestly ministry as his father's was. It was a faith born in the desert, on rocky ground; nurtured by silence and open space and tested by the challenges that only the wilderness can bring: harsh

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physical conditions, isolating mental situations. It was a faith born out of a personal relationship and a personal call to action from God.

It was this call that found John at the Jordan river, preaching and baptizing, encouraging repentance, preparing the people for the One who was to come—fulfilling the purpose for which he was made, for which he was consecrated. And the people came—came from all around the region of Judea. Some perhaps just came to look or listen to the oddly-dressed hermit with his passionate words of warning, of invitation, of prophecy—could this man be for real? Is he a crazy man or does he make sense? Could he be the long-awaited prophet or even the Messiah? I imagine that the questions and doubts concerning John were many. And yet, even while his words and presence maybe confused or disturbed some—particularly, I imagine, the powerful, secure, and wealthy—he was still fascinating; an unknown, yet compelling, figure. A person who perhaps reminded them of the prophets of old: Elijah, Isaiah.

Of those who came to the River Jordan to see and hear John, there were many who accepted the invitation to be immersed in the water, confessing their sins, seeking forgiveness, a new start. Whether they believed John's words or were just caught up in the moment, no one knows. But they were drawn by his presence, by his message: the time is near, the Lord is coming! It was a message of hope in a troubling time, a refreshing change from the priests and scribes who taught God's word and commandments in a legalistic manner. The people were faint with thirst for a sign that God still loved and cherished God's people. After all, so much around them pointed to the very opposite: their land occupied by a powerful and brutal foreign power, a religious and local governmental hierarchy too cozy with Rome, and a society increasingly marked by opulent

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wealth contrasted by deep poverty. This John, whoever he is, is a reminder of God's faithfulness to God's promises: promises of salvation given, of justice rendered, of abundance provided. He is also a harbinger of hope, one who points to a future better than the past. A future that includes a God who is near.

While the people struggled over his identity, John was very clear about who he was—and who he was not. He was a prophet—one who was a messenger of God's word, a witness to the words and action of God. One who calls to others, so that he may point them away from himself. But he was not a figure as from the old—for what he was to prepare the people for was very new indeed. He instituted no new laws; he did not enter into a new covenant with God on behalf of the people. Most importantly, he declared, he was not the Messiah, the One destined to reconcile God's people to God, to bring peace to a hurting people, to make known God's love for God's children in a very real and concrete way. That call belonged to another. John was a witness, one who testifies to the truth, to the light—and to prepare people for a relationship with the incarnate God in Christ.

We too are called to be witnesses, testifying to the light. Perhaps we are not called to stand at the Cooper or Delaware Rivers, preaching and baptizing—could be interesting, however. But each and every one of us are to carry within us the gospel message, and to let that show forth in our lives, in our words and in our actions. Like John, we are not the Messiah: we are not called to save the world from sin, but rather, to bring others to know the One who loves them, and us, beyond all measure. We are called to live in hope, even when—especially when—the present

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seems dark and fearful. Our lives are ones to be grounded in faith, and not in fear; in trust in God, and not trust of our own meager resources. Today—and every day—is the day that the world needs to hear that message—from you, from me. Those we reach out to may not always accept the message, they may not enter the river—but that does not mean that we abandon our call—the call to witness to Christ in our lives.

Who are you? they may ask.

And you may say...I am a Christian.

Amen.