

## Who Do You Think You Are?

In our Gospel reading today we have our second encounter of the season with the figure of John the Baptist. John was introduced into our Advent last week, and this week we see him confronted by representatives from the religious leadership in Jerusalem who've come to ask him *who he is*, how he identifies himself, how he provides a context for this unusual ministry he's conducting. The priests and the Levites know that John is doing something important—after all, people from the whole surrounding countryside have come out to hear him; he is clearly having a sizable impact on the religious dynamics of their time—but *what* important thing John is doing, the religious leaders haven't figured out yet. So they want to know who John thinks he is. So they ask him right out: Are you the Messiah? John says No. Are you Elijah? John says No. Are you the Prophet? John says No. Whoever John is, he is not the one the priests and Levites think he thinks he is.

Now, each of the names the priests and Levites put before John has its own particular meaning, its own particular cluster of connections in the traditions and expectations of the people's religious hope. "Messiah" of course is a title that most of us are familiar with, because that title came to be connected with Jesus in a distinctive way. But what we might be less familiar with is the wide variety of expectations attached to the title "Messiah" in Jesus' and John's own day. For some people, the Messiah was expected to be a great political and military leader, the heir to King David who would step forth to claim David's throne, and raise up Jerusalem's armies just as David had done, and drive out all the foreign oppressors just like David did, and establish Jerusalem as the capital of a restored Davidic monarchy. There were a lot of people in John's community who couldn't wait to see that kind of Messiah come and crush the Romans. But there were others who took their expectations of the Messiah even further: they expected the Messiah would do battle not only against political and military oppressors but against spiritual oppressors as well: they expected the Messiah would be a supernatural figure who would lead God's faithful people into battle against Satan and the spiritual forces of wickedness in order to end this world and bring about the new heavens and the new earth of God's promise. The community of Essenes, for instance, believed that the Messiah was coming to lead the Children of Light in final battle against the Children of Darkness—and the Essenes performed ritual cleansings to prepare themselves for that battle. John the Baptist looks to the priests and Levites like he's doing kind of the same thing... So maybe he's girding up for Armageddon. Maybe he thinks he's the heir to David's throne. So they ask him: Are you the Messiah? But John says No, I am not.

Well, then, if John isn't the Messiah, maybe he's Elijah. In John's time, there was a widespread belief among Jews that Elijah would reappear on the earth just before the Day of Judgment was to come. That belief goes back to an episode in the Second Book of the Kings, where it was told that at the end of his life Elijah was taken up bodily into heaven in a chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire. The Israelites interpreted this to mean that Elijah had never really died, that his soul was never separated from his body, and that therefore Elijah could return from heaven to earth someday when God had some new mission for him. That interpretation was given a kind of "official" form when the prophet Malachi proclaimed in God's Name, "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." According to Malachi, the returned Elijah would prepare the people for judgment, because his mission would be "to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that God would not come and strike the land with a curse." John came preaching a baptism of repentance—and in Aramaic the word for "repent" means something like "turn your heart"—so when people heard that, they thought right away of Elijah. We even heard in the Gospel last week that John was clothed in camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist—and that is the same sort of clothing Elijah was said to have worn in the Books of the Kings. So, the priests and the Levites think, if John doesn't claim to be the Messiah, and if John is doing Elijah-like things, maybe he's... So they ask him: Are you Elijah? But John says, No, I am not.

Okay, then, if John isn't the Messiah, and if he's not Elijah, maybe he's the Prophet. Not just any prophet, mind you, but *the* Prophet. When Jews of John's time talked about "the Prophet," they meant someone God promised to send to take Moses' place far in the future. It was recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy that when Moses was giving his farewell address to the Israelites, he said "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet." The people understood that promise of a

Prophet-like-Moses to mean that someday God would send someone who bring them a Law, a Torah, that would not just be rules written on stone, but would be wisdom written in their hearts. The Prophet-like-Moses would bring them a Covenant that would make their relationship with God as close as seeing God face to face, like Moses did. The Prophet-like-Moses would help them understand what God truly wants for lives of holiness, and the Prophet-like-Moses would help them live those lives of holiness, too. John was certainly preaching about living lives of holiness. So the priests and the Levites ask him: Are you the Prophet? But John says, No, I am not.

Every time the Jerusalem representatives try to pin a name on John, he rejects it. Why? I think it was because the names the priests and Levites wanted to assign to John were too small, they were too easy, they didn't allow enough room for the really new and really surprising thing that God was doing through John. "Messiah" and "Elijah" and "Prophet" were like little boxes, carved out, predefined, tagged and labelled, with all their meanings and connections and expectations already spelled out—and the priests and Levites want to put John and his baptizing in one of those boxes, because that way they think they can understand him and comprehend him and get him under their control. If they can just pin the right *name* on John then he won't be a mysterious enigma anymore, he won't be a threat to their power anymore, they won't have to worry about him anymore.

But John won't let himself be put in their boxes. John's ministry won't fit in any of their neatly predefined categories. What God is doing in John is too big to be named with any of their customary names. To be sure, John's ministry isn't coming *completely* out of the blue, John isn't working *totally* in a vacuum: John does link his baptizing work back to the traditions of the people. "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said," John says. "I baptize with water," as the prophet Ezekiel foretold, John says, "to prepare for the mightier one who is coming after me." John's work has its roots in God's ancient promises, but what John is doing is *more* than just the ancient promise. What God is doing in John is more than just acting out again what has gone before. John is not the Messiah, John is not Elijah, John is not the Prophet, because in John the Baptist God is doing something *new*, preparing a new way for a new Savior who will bring a new life for all the world. And Jesus, when he is revealed standing among them, will not be the Messiah they expect, either.

And I think it's that note of the more-than-we-expect that speaks most clearly to us in our observance of this Advent season. The Gospel Good News for us today is a call to us not to try to put God's mission in a box, a call to us not to think we can get control of what God is doing among us if we just pin the right name on it. The Gospel Good News for us is that what God is empowering us to do is rooted in tradition but goes beyond tradition, too. God calls us to worship: but our worship is more than just a word, our worship is more than just going through the motions of liturgies and prayer texts and pageants that we've always done before; our worship is to pour ourselves and our hopes and our dreams and our energies into all the traditional forms, to pray the familiar prayers and sing the familiar songs as if they were springing brand new from the deepest devotions of our hearts. God calls us to service: but our service is more than just a word, our service is more than just doing the projects we've always done before; our service is to let the serving of Noon Lunch, and shopping for Giving Tree presents, and sharing the Outreach Dinner on Christmas Eve—to let these things become occasions for encountering the living presence of Christ, to let ourselves truly feel God's love working through us as we work for others, to let Jesus' face be revealed in the faces of those we serve, to be witnesses of the light of Christ shining in every exchange between us. God calls us to celebration: but our celebration is more than just a word, our celebration is more than just the kind of forced jollity of a commercial holiday frenzy; our celebration is to rejoice always, and pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances, so that our spirits and souls and bodies may be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God's call to us this Advent is to be like John the Baptist: to have our roots in God's ancient promises, but to let God's grace grow our ministries beyond all the boxes and all the preconceptions and all the labels the world might try to put on them.

The priests and the Levites came to John asking "Who are you?" and "How do you identify yourself?" And John answered by identifying himself with God's ever-new, ever-growing, ever-surprising mission. May we identify ourselves with God's mission, too, in this season of Advent, and in all our lives. Amen.