



“Knowing Who You Are”

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

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

It is that Sunday of the church’s year when we welcome back our favorite, if somewhat eccentric, relative. This is the Sunday when we are reminded of John the Baptist, that unusual character who appears in the Judean wilderness, dressed in a camel’s skin, eating bugs dipped in honey, and, in general, upsetting anyone in any position of power or authority. According to the tradition of scriptures, John was related to Jesus, as Mary and Elizabeth (John’s mother) were “kinswomen” in the old translation. That’s about all we know of the genealogical connection. Still, John the Baptist is an intriguing, if not a somewhat confusing, character.

And if John is a confusing character to us, he was all that and much more to the people of his day. The people of 1st century Judea had no more idea of what to do with John than we do. He confused them, bewildered them, and perplexed them.

That comes through in the passage from John’s gospel – written by someone else using the name “John.” The religious leaders of the day didn’t know what to make of John, so they dispatched envoys to question him and inquire of him as to who he was and what he was doing. It is in that investigation that we can find a word from God for us this morning.

When the special counsels, appointed by the Sanhedrin, went to Judea to investigate John, they went with three possible questions to be answered in their exploration. Was John the Messiah? Was John really Elijah? Was John a prophet in the tradition of Moses? These questions established the approach their investigation would take.

Was John the Messiah? Remember that a Messiah was seen by the people of the day, not solely as a religious leader, but also as a political leader, who would defeat the oppressors in the land and establish a kingdom of justice and peace. The Messiah was not just expected by religious people, but also by those who were looking for a national figure to lead them out from under the occupation of the Romans and establish the Realm of God on earth. Could John be the Messiah?

Was John really the prophet Elijah, come back to earth? There was a tradition that claimed that Elijah was taken away to heaven in a fiery chariot and that he was still alive and well. Another tradition claimed that before the Messiah would come, the prophet Elijah would return before the day of the Lord's arrival. Could it be that John was Elijah, back from heaven, or the grave, or some other supernatural location?

Was John really a prophet in the grand tradition of Moses? There were other ancient traditions, especially among the Essene community, of which John might have been a part, which claimed that a prophet-like-Moses would be raised up before the coming of the Lord's Day. Was John a new prophet-like-Moses, who might lead the people out of their bondage and slavery to Rome, into a new day of freedom and peace? Could it be that John was the promised prophet in the grand tradition of Moses?

To each of the questions posed, John answered, "I am not." "I am not the Messiah." "I am not Elijah." "I am not the prophet." Had he answered positively to any of those questions, he could well have parlayed that answer into a place of prominence and power. He could have become rich and influential. He could have become more than he would otherwise ever become.

But John knew who he was and who he wasn't. He knew what he had been sent to do and what he was not sent to do. The investigators asked him, "if you aren't the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet, who are you?" John's answer was unequivocal and unmistakable: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'make straight the way of the Lord.'" John knew exactly who he was.

The question of identity - of who we are - is a question that comes to us again and again. Our identity changes over time. I began life as John and Lillian's son. Then, I was Melody and Keith's older brother. Then I was "the minister." One evening, as I was waiting for Wendy to arrive at a concert, two women - who I recognized - walked by. I said

hello. When they had passed me, I heard one woman say to the other, “That’s Judy McCormick’s new son-in-law.” Then I became Lydia, Joanna, and Abigail’s father. And, if history and precedent are any indication, I will gain new identities over time.

In our highly charged political world, we may be tempted to see ourselves as Republicans, Democrats, Independents, or any of the other political powers that are at work in our world. We are part of that political “tribe,” and it is our first identity. We may identify ourselves by the school we attended, a club we belong to, a sorority or fraternity of which we are a member. In Evansville, we may see ourselves as a “west sider” or an “east sider.” Some of us identify ourselves by our vocation. Some of us identify ourselves by our generation. Some of us identify ourselves in other ways, but we all have a way that we talk about ourselves and understand who we are.

But, there is another identity and it has everything to do with John the Baptizer. You see, in our baptism, we receive the principle identity of our lives. In our baptism, we are claimed by God and given the name – “child of God.”

Rising from the waters of baptism, we take on a new lens through which we view the world around us. That lens is Jesus Christ and through him we see both God and the world. In Jesus Christ, we see who God is and who God calls us to be. In Jesus Christ, we see the neighbor in need, the broken longing for wholeness, the forgotten yearning to be recognized and welcomed. In Jesus Christ, we see the wrongs of the world and how to set them right. Rising from the waters of baptism, we take on our new identity of child of God and disciple of Jesus Christ.

In the Confession of 1967, we read:

Christian baptism marks the receiving of the same Spirit by all God’s people. Baptism with water represents not only cleansing from sin but a dying with Christ and a joyful rising with him to new life. It commits all Christians to die each day to sin and to live for righteousness. In baptism the church celebrates the renewal of the covenant with which God has bound his people to himself.

This is what John came to do: to bring together a people who would live the new life to which God calls all people and to prepare the way for God to come among us in Jesus Christ. John came to baptize us into a new identity, to help us know who we are *and* whose we are. John came to inaugurate the new beginning of a new covenant between God and all people.

We are God’s people – first and foremost. Everything else finds its place beneath that identification and everything else in our lives is affected by that identity. We are God’s people – children of God – not because we say so, but because God says so.

And as we grow into that new identity, we begin to exhibit to the world around us the way God intended the world to be, the life God intended us to live, and the power of compassion, justice, peace, and love. As we know who we are and live into that knowledge, the realm of God is established in new ways and the world sees the goodness and faithfulness of God.

Who are we? We are God's people, disciples of Jesus Christ, baptized into the new life that will find its fullest expression in the realm of God which is already here and coming in new and greater ways. We are God's people. For now and evermore. Amen.



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