

“Who Are You?”
John 1:19-28; Isaiah 40:1-5

In the summer of 1971, I had finished my junior year in college and was the co-director of the Salvation Army’s Day Camp in Harlem in New York City. This was before Bill Clinton came to Harlem. The summer I was there, four policemen were shot. And the police station, right around the corner from the Salvation Army building where I lived, had to post officers outside in order to prevent drive-by bombings of the police station.

I worked for Brigadier Mary Nisiewicz, a mid to late fifties large woman of Polish descent who was the corp commander, we would say pastor, of the Harlem corp, or church. The Brigadier, and everyone called her The Brigadier, had led Harlem’s Salvation Army for a number of years. During the 1968 riots, the Brigadier allowed the police to use the Army’s gym as their base of operations. The Brigadier knew everyone in Harlem, and everyone knew her. One night she single handedly stopped two policemen from beating a young Puerto Rican man. She could not be conned, fooled, or intimidated. Though short on both preaching skills and social niceties, her Christian faith and concern for every single person made her the most extraordinary pastor with whom I have ever worked. When Jesus comes back, I think he will look a whole lot like the Brigadier.

The Brigadier lived on the fifth floor of the church building, while I resided in a room on the fourth. Part of my salary was that I ate dinner with the Brigadier most evenings. One evening she said to me, “This Saturday, the district is having a cookout at Star Lake Camp. It will be hosted by the District Commander. Why don’t you come with me.”

Star Lake is the Salvation Army’s summer camp for the entire New York/New Jersey area. As I remember, it is probably an hour and a half to two hours from the city. The Brigadier didn’t like driving. I could see where this was heading. I agreed to go.

Well, when we arrived I discovered this was a big deal. All the corp officers, or ministers, from the surrounding area were present and the district commander was grilling big steaks for everyone. I wandered toward the back of the line, while the Brigadier ended up near the front. It was a nice event, the Army officers enthusiastic about the treat of indulging in large pieces of quality red meat. When my turn came, I stepped up holding my plate out, only to see the district commander rest his fork and say, “Who are you?”

I said, “I’m Ludwig Weaver,” my empty plate looking forlorn as everyone stopped to listen to this conversation.

“What are you doing here?” he asked with the tone of one man accusing another of trying to steal food.

Now completely humiliated, I launched into my explanation of being the Brigadier’s chauffeur, when out of the corner of my eye I spotted the Brigadier headed toward the grill. Looking firmly at the district commander she simply said, “He’s with me.”

I got my steak. Even the district commander didn’t mess with the Brigadier.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

This is the essence of the questions that confront John the Baptist in our scripture. Verse nineteen tells us that “the Jews” sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to question the Baptist. Though there are some deviations, typically when the gospel writer John says “the Jews,” he intends the religious authorities, not the Jewish people. This means that the religious authorities sent priests, from the Jerusalem temple, and Levites, which normally designate Temple functionaries, but can also indicate the Temple police.

“Who are you?” they ask. Now, they knew who John the Baptist was. His father, Zechariah, was a priest. Only those descended from Moses’ brother, Aaron, could be priests. And, if you were a descendant of Aaron, no one could prevent you from being a priest. So, John the Baptist was one of them. They knew who he was. What they wanted to know was who he claimed to be.

John replies, “I am not the Messiah.”

“What then? Are you Elijah?” First century Jews interpreted Malachi 4:5 to mean the prophet Elijah would return to precede the coming of the Messiah.

“I am not Elijah.”

“Are you a prophet?” In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses says God would raise up a prophet many believed would prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

“No.”

“Then who are you? What do you say about yourself?”

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

“Well, then,” they ask, “if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet, why are you baptizing people?” Otherwise, where do you get your authority to do this?

John replies, “I baptize with water. One is coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

A man owned a small ranch near San Antonio. The Texas Department of Labor claimed he was not paying proper wages to his help and sent an agent out to interview him. “I need a list of your employees and how much you pay them,” demanded the agent.

“Well,” replied the farmer, “there’s my farm hand who’s been with me for three years. I pay him \$200 a week plus free room and board. The cook has been here for eighteen months, and I pay her \$150 per week plus free room and board. Then there’s the half-wit. He works about eighteen hours every day and does about ninety percent of all the work around here. He makes about \$10 per week, pays his own room and board, and I buy him a bottle of bourbon every Saturday night.”

“That’s the guy I want to talk to...the half wit,” says the agent.

“What would be me,” replied the farmer.

John the Baptist was saying to his questioners, “I’m just the half wit who is not worthy to untie the Messiah’s sandals. “the One who comes after me is the person you want to see.”

John the Baptist was a rock star. I saw in the paper where the rock band, KISS, whose members dress in outlandish costumes was coming to Greenville. Well, John the Baptist, dressed in a strange looking prophet costume, was the KISS of first century Palestine. Not only Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us that John the Baptist drew huge crowds to the Jordan Valley. The gospel author, John, writing much later than Matthew, Mark, and Luke, presupposes that his readers already know all about John the Baptist. So, instead of describing his appearance or success, John goes right to the heart of John the Baptist’s mission and purpose.

Now, so often in this gospel, religious authorities are antagonistic. But what is going on in this scene is not only legitimate, but necessary. Being a member of the priestly tribe, John deserved to be scrutinized by these priests. Plus, being sent by the Pharisees likely indicates they represented the Sanhedrin, the seventy member council, led by the High Priest, who ruled Judaism. One of their jobs was to unmask false prophets.

So, the questions John the Baptist is asked are legitimate. What is interesting, and instructive, is that he uses them to point away from himself, and to Jesus. At this time, John the Baptist is the star, not Jesus. John has every reason, incentive, and opportunity to say, “Look at me. See how important I am. You have to go through me to get to anyone higher up.”

But he simply replies, “It is not about me. It is about Jesus. My only job is to prepare the way for the Messiah. I’m just here to do the roadwork, to make it easier for people to see him.”

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the four Sundays before Christmas. Advent is a time of preparation as we make ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and the reception of him in our hearts and minds. Advent’s purple color recalls a time of penance and meditation, of preparation.

John the Baptist’s quotation from Isaiah to “make straight the way of the Lord” is imagery from a time when there were no paved roads. If a king was anticipating a journey, a crew would be sent ahead to prepare the road, make it straight and smooth so the king could easily and quickly get where he was going. John the Baptist’s mission was to prepare the way for Jesus. That was the goal and purpose of his life.

This morning, Advent calls us to ask, have you and I prepared the way for the Messiah to come to us? How straight have you made the path, how smooth the road into your heart and mind?

Little Johnny and his family were having Sunday dinner at his Grandmother’s house. Everyone was seated around the table as the food was being served. When Little Johnny received his plate, he started eating right away. “Johnny! Please wait until we say our prayer,” said his mother.

“I don’t have to,” the boy replied.

“Of course, you do,” his mother insisted. “We say a prayer before eating, at our house.”

“That’s our house,” Johnny explained. “But this is Grandma’s house and she knows how to cook!”

Most of us live lives of such goodness and bounty that preparation for our spirits can be easily overlooked. Advent is a time to slow down, stop and ask ourselves: “How have I prepared myself to grow in faith?”

“...the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.”

There is a rabbinic saying from about 250 AD that goes: “Every service which a servant will perform for his master, a disciple will do for his rabbi, except loosing his sandal thong.” John the Baptist chose the lowest action required of a slave to illustrate his position relative to Jesus. “Yes, the slave at the bottom of the totem pole will be the one to take the sandals off the master’s dirty, smelly feet, sandals covered in all kinds of animal waste. But I am not worthy do to even that for the One who is coming after me.”

Who Jesus was determined John's actions. John understood his status, his position, his duty, relative to the One coming after him. John the Baptist viewed himself through the lens of Jesus.

How do you and I determine how we will live, act, spend, read, think, work? What basis, criteria, do we employ to decide how we will live our lives? To what or whom do we compare our goals, values, and actions? What we believe about Jesus determines our discipleship. If he is only a great teacher, a paragon of moral living, an extraordinary human being, then he does not demand, need, or deserve our allegiance, much less our time, money and talents.

John the Baptist gave his heart and soul, his very life, because he believed Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the very Son of God sent by God. The season of Advent always brings us back to one question: Do you and I believe Jesus is the Son of God? If, with John the Baptist you answer "yes," then how are you demonstrating it?

Fareed Zakaria is an American of Pakistani descent. A columnist for Newsweek magazine and other media, I find him to be a person of extraordinary insight into the politics of the Middle East and Asia. In one of his articles he spoke of the death of Sam Huntington, a political writer who greatly influenced Zakaria. In speaking of Huntington's detractors he quoted the close of one of Huntington's books where Huntington replied to those who were critical of his words.

Huntington writes: "[They] say America is a lie because its reality falls so short of its ideals. They are wrong. America is not a lie; it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is also a hope."

The Church can at times seem like a lie because it is a disappointment. That is because you and I are disappointments. As the Apostle Paul says of himself: "I do the things I would not do and those I would do, I do not." Yet, in the midst of our acknowledged sinfulness and disappointment, stands Jesus. If the Church is a disappointment, it is because Jesus is the hope.

Do you and I believe Jesus is the hope? And are we striving to show that hope to other people?

"Who Are You?"

It was a legitimate question these priests and Levites asked John the Baptist. But they likely did not receive the answer they were seeking. John the Baptist chose to define himself by telling them who Jesus would be.

This morning, on this first Sunday of Advent, each of us asks ourselves this same question: “Who are you?” Does our answer find its definition in our possessions? Our intellect? Our family or job?

Or, do our voices and our lives answer: “I am a disciple of Jesus.”?

Ludwig L. Weaver, Jr.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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