

December 17, 2017
3rd Sunday of Advent
John 1:6-8, 19-28

A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.

And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent out priests and Levites (to him) to ask him, "*Who are you?*" "He admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, "I am not the Messiah." So they asked him, "*What are you then? Are you Elijah?*" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." So they said to him, "*Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?*" He said: "I am 'the voice of one crying out in the desert, "Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as Isaiah the prophet said."

Some Pharisees were also sent. They asked him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie." This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Background:

John's father, Zechariah, was a highly respected rural priest. In a society where a person's role and status in the community was largely determined by one's family, John was acting out of character. He should have been acting like a respectable member of a priestly family, and following in his father's footsteps. However, his behavior was more like one of the disgruntled priests who became separated from the aristocratic priests of Jerusalem. The wealth and lifestyle of the Jerusalem priests alienated some of their rural counterparts from them. John's appearance and way of life seemed more typical of one who had assumed the role of a prophet, living apart from the religious leaders of the day.

Like a prophet, John spoke the desire of God: that the people should live their relationship with God more faithfully. John's baptism was a sign of a person's repentance. Baptisms were common and had a variety of meanings. Naaman's washing in the Jordan would have been understood as a kind of baptism (2 Kings 5:14). High priests were required to participate in rites of purification before and after rites of atonement (Leviticus 16:4). Women were required to perform a form of baptism after their period of menstruation (Leviticus 15). So it is not so unusual that John's presence has raised some questions for the religious authorities.

The priests and Pharisees have come to John to discover who he is. Who is this person, out in the desert, calling people to repentance and baptizing? He tells them that he is not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet. At this time, there was no clear understanding of who the Messiah might be, or even what kind of role the Messiah would play. The term messiah means "anointed

one.” In their history, the Jews had anointed people for a variety of reasons. Kings, priests, and some prophets had been anointed.

There were those among John’s followers, and among the people, who believed that the Baptist himself was the Messiah. Nevertheless, John denied that he was the Messiah, no matter how one understood that term. He did say that there was one among them so great that he was not worthy to undo his sandals, the role of one’s lowliest servant.

Reflection Questions:

1. Have there been times when people expected a certain kind of behavior or ability of you because they knew your family?
2. Have you encountered people who you find difficult to understand, or who cause you to be confused by their words or actions?
3. The religious leaders of the day went out to John, asking “Who are you?” If you were asked this same question today, how would you respond?
4. John’s behavior caused confusion because it did not match who the authorities believed he was, the son of Zachariah. Are you aware of places where your behavior may cause confusion for those who think they know you?
5. John used baptism as a sign of repentance and turning back to God. Have you used meaningful rituals of repentance in your own life?
6. Can you take some time to talk to God about how you see your life pointing to God, or your need for repentance, or some other self-awareness that arose within you from your reading of this gospel?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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