

Who Are You?

Overview John's witness inspires us to confess who we are in Christ

Theme Who Are You?

Metaphor/Image Fingerprint

Treatment When interrogated about his identity, the intriguing and mysterious John the Baptist repeatedly declares that while he is not the Messiah, he is making straight the way of the Lord. His humble declaration calls us to ask the question, "Who are you?"—both about Jesus and about ourselves.

Human Need Knowing who Jesus is, and who you are in relation to Jesus

Experience John's answer to the question is that he is not the Messiah, but rather a servant. His self-identity of striking humility inspires us to see ourselves as humble servants doing the work of "making straight the way of the lord."

Word

Primary Scripture John 1:6-8, 19-28

Lectionary week 3rd Week of Advent; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Related Scripture Romans 12:3 (Paul's exhortation to humility)

Topic(s)

Primary Topics witness, testimony, identity, humility

Related Topics lordship, Messiah, discernment, baptism

Movie(s)

1. The 6th Day (2000)

Plot: Pilot Adam Gibson (Arnold Schwarzenegger) meets

a clone of himself in a future world and stumbles into a grand conspiracy about clones taking over the world.

Clip: Gibson (Schwarzenegger) tries to convince a police detective that a clone is stealing his identity, although clones supposedly don't exist. Good example of how sometimes our responses can cause others to question who we are.

Time: (VHS) 36:52-38:18, (DVD) Chapter 11, 0:00-1:26, length 1:26

Music

1. "Who Are You?"- The Who. 70s hit, great for an opener.
2. "Worthy, You Are Worthy"- contemporary praise.
3. "We Bow Down"- Contemporary praise.
4. "To God Be the Glory"- hymn.

Lumiclip description

This cinematic piece captures the mixture of curiosity and fear that would come from having to log into a futuristic identification system. Like in films such as Gattaca and The 6th Day, sometimes our identity is questioned. Hard Driving, Technological, Dramatic.
Running time :42 Volume 6 Clip 1

Integration

Interpretive notes

John the Baptist is a central figure in each of the Gospels. He provides a refractory lens through which we see Jesus. But, as in many other aspects of the Gospel tradition, John has a distinctive perspective on John the Baptist from the other evangelists. In contrast to the Synoptics, John presents John the Baptist as **not** being Elijah or the prophet who would prepare the way for the Messiah. In John's Gospel, John the Baptist has a more humble role of being the one to whom God reveals who Jesus is (1.31-33) and who points out Jesus to others (1.35-36). The mystery of John's identity reflects the even greater mystery of Jesus' identity.

The first question of John is an inquiry about which of the major characters of Jewish eschatological expectation he was. This question is an official inquiry by representatives of Judaism, priests and Levites from Jerusalem, not unlike a congressional probe or FBI investigation. The introduction to John's

testimony emphasizes this official character of his witness: "He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed..." (1.20) This entire motif of an official inquiry about John's identity occurs only in John's Gospel. John's affirmation that John the Baptist is not Elijah is one of several places in which he blatantly contradicts other Gospels, in this case, Mark and Matthew, where the Baptist is presented as Elijah (coat of camel's hair, leather belt; ate locusts and wild honey). In John, there is an assumption behind the question that John is, or thought he was, one of those characters. But he denies all three: the Messiah, Elijah, and the Prophet. This probably reflects the assumptions of John's audience, who may have gotten this idea from the John the Baptist movement, which may have still been active in John's time, or from hearing the other Gospels. This denial follows the notice in the prologue in regard to John: "He came as a witness to testify to the light so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to bear witness to the light." (Jn 1.7-8)

John introduces the second part of the interrogation about why John is baptizing by the notice that these priests and Levites had been sent from the Pharisees. This is probably John's way of introducing the officials of Judaism in his day (75-95 A.D.). In Jesus' time, the Pharisees had no official authority but were only a lay movement of highly religious Jews. It was only after the Jewish War (66-70 A.D.), when the Temple and the system of priestly authority were destroyed, that the Pharisees became the official authorities of Judaism.

John emphasizes the importance of testimony and bearing witness more than any other evangelist. John the Baptist is the first example of those who testify and bear witness to Jesus. The Greek word, *marturia*, translated here (1.19) as "testimony," is part of the family of Greek words from which the English word "martyr" is a descendant. Martyrs are those who give testimony by giving up their life.

John contrasts his baptism with the person of the one who is coming after him, the one they do not know. They do not recognize the one who is coming or even

know who he is, but John does, as is made clear in the next story. (1.29-36) John puts this phrase, "the one you do not know" in place of "the one who is mightier than I..." as in Mark and Matthew. John shares the apocalyptic expectations of a hidden one to come.

In response to their question, John the Baptist claims the role of the voice in Isaiah crying out, "Make straight his path." John includes only this one element of the LXX translation of Isaiah 40.3: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a high for our God.'" The Synoptics include "Prepare the way of the Lord." John the Baptist is presented as a witness to Jesus, not a forerunner like Elijah.

John speaks in a veiled and mysterious way of the one who comes after him. John describes him as the one the thong of whose sandals John is not worthy to untie. This is the work of a slave who had no rights and no privileges.

A striking element of this story is the characterization of John the Baptist as a profoundly humble person. Humility is a right and appropriate assessment of oneself (cf. Romans 12.3; Philippians 2.1-8). Thus John in this story three times denies being one of the great characters of the eschatological drama. His claim to be the one crying in the wilderness preparing the way for another is only a first sign of what is to follow. He allows and even implicitly encourages his disciples to follow Jesus (John 1.35-37). And later he describes himself as the friend of a bridegroom that ends with the statement: "He must increase but I must decrease." (John 3.30) This is a portrayal of a degree of humility and a peaceful self-assessment that is truly remarkable.

What does this story do in relation to Jesus? It introduces the mystery of Jesus' identity. The clarification of John's identity—who he is not and who he is—heightens the mystery of who Jesus is. Jesus is a figure of immense significance whom John honors to an extraordinary degree. He is the one whom you do not know.

These are two places to start: the wonder of John the Baptist as the last of the prophets and the mystery of Jesus' identity. Both of these motifs counter our tendency in the Church to assume that we know who Jesus is. We may confess a belief but the invitation of Advent is to deeply ponder the mystery of Jesus' identity that we do not know. The entire Gospel of John is an exploration of that mystery. The Gospel reflects the experience of the original disciples of Jesus who only gradually realized who Jesus was, even after his death. (John 20-21) The Gospel of John invites us to enter into that mystery by listening to his story. We invite everyone to contemplate that mystery by entering into the spirit of Advent. The question we all ask of Jesus and of John is then: "Who are you?"

Call to Worship

Have the worship leader take a wireless microphone and walk among the congregation, asking people the question, "Who Are You?" (The question needs to be posed in an interrogative, official style.) After asking a few people the question, before people have a chance to even adequately answer:

"Today we remember the time that John the Baptist was interrogated about his identity in relationship to Jesus. It was serious. Let's worship the God who both gives us an identity and made God's identity known in Jesus."

Storytelling/Scripture Recital

Closing words/Benediction

"Go this week in the confidence and love of God, knowing that your identity is as a humble servant of Christ. And, as a humble servant, you will be honored as one who has been chosen by God to bear testimony."

Prayer

"Lord, we recognize that often you are hidden to us and that we do not know who you are. We often do not know who we are, either. We pray for the courage and the humility to be as John the Baptist and declare our identity in Christ. Show us where we fit in your design and your plan for the human family."

Drama

Display

Set up a faux police station counter "booking station," with fingerprint pads and paper and other police station type accessories.

Other

Have inkpads available and invite people to press their thumbprints onto the pads, then onto a bulletin. Reflecting on their fingerprints, ask people to ponder their identity in Christ.

Keywords

witness, testimony, identity, humility, lordship, Messiah, discernment, baptism, fingerprint, police, FBI, interrogation, The 6th Day, The Sixth Day