WHO ARE YOU?

John 1:19–28

Key Verse: 1:23

“John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Make straight the way for the Lord.”’”

It’s complicated, fascinating, and so deep, one of the most important questions in life: “Who are you?” Are we defined by our race, or gender, or looks, or economic status, by what we’re good at, what we do, what people think of us? Sometimes we ask somebody we’ve never met before, “So, who are you?”, but we’re not really interested. Sometimes we find out something about someone we thought we knew, and we ask, “Who *are* you?” What’s even more disturbing is when we realize we don’t really know ourselves. Things or people are stripped away, and we find ourselves lost. It seems that knowing who we really are is related to knowing what we’re doing in life. And then sometimes we’re eagerly trying to get to know the wrong person! We try so hard and find out it was all really misdirected. Has that ever happened to you? Who do *you* want to know? In today’s passage we see people repeatedly asking John the Baptist, *“Who are you?”* He knows, but he doesn’t want to talk about it. Instead, he turns people’s attention to someone else. He wants them to get to know Jesus. Putting it all together, knowing Jesus, it seems, enables us to get to know ourselves, and it enables us to get to know what we should be doing in life. Through this Bible study may God open our hearts and speak to us personally.

Look at verses 19,20. Here’s the basic scenario. At this point John the Baptist was at the height of his very impressive ministry. Verse 28 tells us that he was baptizing people on the other side of the Jordan River, at Bethany. It’s not the Bethany that was a suburb of Jerusalem, but a different Bethany—a place some scholars say was a large, remote area east of the Sea of Galilee called “Batanea.” In verse 23 it’s referred to as a “wilderness.” In any case, it was a place where so many people went. Why were people going to all that trouble to go way out there? It was to hear and see this man, John the Baptist. Why? He was a very powerful man with a very powerful message. What was he saying? He was calling all the people of his times to repent. He didn’t care whether they were kings or paupers. It wasn’t a shrill or obnoxious or judgmental message. His message of repentance was so powerful because it was so genuine. Somehow people sensed God had sent him. And his message was backed up with his own personal lifestyle. Many try to tell others something, but they themselves are hypocritical, so what they’re saying has no power. But John was living a simple life in the desert, totally devoted to listening to God. God was telling him to tell people to repent. It was scary and challenging, but he said it. And he told people to prove they were repenting by asking them to be baptized. Being baptized symbolized washing their sins away. It meant making a break with their sinful past, a brand new start, a commitment to a new life, a life really committed to God. His message was so powerful that people were convicted on the spot and were getting baptized in droves.

John’s ministry out in the wilderness was so powerful that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. Why did they want to know? It was pretty simple: their synagogues were being emptied. People were not coming to *them* anymore—everybody was going out to *John*. They felt he was a real threat. In fact, many people at that time were wondering if John might possibly be the promised Messiah (Lk3:15). But these Jewish leaders weren’t really interested in knowing; they just wanted to find a way to discredit John and win people back so that they could feel safe again. So they didn’t even come in person—they just sent people. It tells us that in asking the question, “Who are you?” our motives are so important. Do we really want to know? Do we want to know for selfish reasons?

Verse 20 says he “did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, ‘I am not the Messiah.’” Though they didn’t say so directly, John knew what they were wondering. It’s interesting how the author writes: “he did not fail to confess.” Why? He’s telling us indirectly that with all that popularity and interest, John was being tempted. As human beings, things can so easily go to our heads. We try to take credit for things we don’t deserve, or pretend to be someone we’re not. It’s especially true with power and popularity. When we do so, we fail. Their question to John was like a test for him, and he did not fail—he passed. He passed by saying, “I am not.” We may not be as impressive as John, but in some shape or form we can have quite a lofty view of ourselves. We may not claim to be the Messiah, but we can think we’re special, or worthy of attention or admiration, or that we can save or help people.

Look at verse 21. Simply speaking, “Elijah” or “the Prophet” refer to powerful men God promised would come. The point here is not them, but that John’s answers to the questions kept getting shorter and shorter: “I am not the Messiah,” “I am not,” “No.” How many people do you know who, when asked persistently, talk less and less about themselves? Most people, if given the chance, love to talk about themselves—so much so that once they start, it’s hard to get away from them. Some people talk like John does here when they’re trying to hide something, when they’re ashamed of who they are. But John wasn’t ashamed or hiding anything. He just thought it was wrong to focus on himself.

Look at verse 22. They were pretty frustrated with him. But it also shows that though they were persistent, they were just trying to take an answer to others; they weren’t really interested themselves. People still do something like this today, when they come to church or Bible study just to please their parents and get them off their backs, or when they have to write a report for religion class and get a grade. Here they finally said, “What do you say about yourself?” At least they stopped trying to define him with their own ideas.

And how did he answer? Read verse 23. It seems kind of strange. Why would John answer who he was by quoting a Bible verse? This prophecy of Isaiah foretold somebody who would come before the Lord. John was saying he was that person. But even then, he wasn’t saying it was something special. He says, “I am a voice.” He didn’t mean he was a good singer; he meant he was just an instrument, like a loudspeaker. What people should pay attention to is not him but his message. What’s important about him is that he was making straight the way for the Lord. His identity was bound up in his God-given mission.

This “wilderness” wasn’t just literal; it was a metaphor for a spiritual wilderness. What’s that? It’s a place where people live without God. There’s no life, no truth in a spiritual wilderness. People are living wildly, to please their sinful natures. In a spiritual wilderness John was calling, “Make straight the way for the Lord.” In Isaiah’s prophecy, it was about building a highway from Babylon through the Arabian desert, so the Jews could return home. But here, it really meant repenting in order to be ready to receive Jesus.

It tells us how we can get to know the one who really matters. We can get to know Jesus when we “make straight the way for the Lord,” when we repent. Isaiah 40:4 goes on to say, “Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain…” It’s not about geography but about the condition of our hearts. The valleys represent our inferiorities, the mountains and hills, our pride, the rough and rugged places, our rebelliousness. It tells us that repentance isn’t just about deeds but about our inner attitudes. If we’re full of inferiority, or pride, or rebellion, we can’t really know Jesus—we’re spiritually blind. It’s hard to change the condition of our hearts, maybe harder than building a long distance highway through a desert. But when we go through the hard process of genuine repentance, God opens our eyes to see Jesus, to really know him. It’s never easy, but it’s so worth it. We need to be willing to do the hard work to personally repent, and to help others to personally repent.

Read verse 23 again. We also see here that John knew clearly who he was. He found who he was in God. He didn’t find his identity in people’s ideas or opinions, in outward activities or appearances. He found who he was in what God told him. People go on quests to find their identity. It often leads nowhere, to great disappointment and confusion. But when we’re really listening to what God’s trying to say to us, it’s the real way to find who we are. And only when we know who we are can we become clear about what we’re doing. So many people go to college because it’s what’s expected, or because they hope to get a good job. Many get confused about their major or their school. The real issue is that they don’t yet know who they are. Instead of trying to meet parents’ expectations or find something to brag about, college students have this precious opportunity in life to think about the big life questions: Who am I? What should I be doing? Sometimes ministry to students can seem futile. But getting them to start listening to God can help them in the most profound ways to learn who they really are, and then, find what to do in life.

Look at verses 24,25. The Pharisees were ultra conservative religious people who knew the Bible well. The problem was, they didn’t get to know God, or themselves, because they didn’t repent; they just got self-righteous. What they focused on here was John baptizing. They didn’t like it. He didn’t seem to have a license. They were implying he was illegitimate. They wanted to shut his ministry down.

How did he answer? Look at verses 26,27. He’s saying his baptism is just with water. He means it’s just outward; it doesn’t have any power to change anybody. But then he quickly changes the subject. He says there’s someone standing among them that they do not know. John is doing his best to get them curious about Jesus. He goes on to say that this unknown person is coming after him, meaning he’s way more important; in fact, he’s the point. And he says he’s not even worthy to untie the straps of this man’s sandals. It’s a statement of extreme humility. John knows himself as a sinner, and he knows who Jesus is, how great he is. These are the two greatest things we should be striving to know in our life journey—the greatness of Jesus, and who we are before him.

So, who are we trying to know? Are we focused on the wrong person? Do we *want* to know Jesus better? Do we really know who *we* are, and, what we’re *doing*? Read verse 23 again. May God help us to listen to God and find who we really are and what he wants us to be doing. May his word lead us to real repentance and help us to make straight the way for the Lord in our hearts. And may God inspire us to help others focus on getting to know the right person, Jesus.