

John 1:6-8, 19-28^{vi vii}

There was a man sent from God, whose name was 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 testify to the light. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord,' " as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

^{vi}About the Gospel: John 1:6-8, 19-28

All of the gospels portray John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus. The Gospel of John emphasizes the Baptist's role as a witness to Jesus as the light that was to appear on the day of salvation. The evangelist John usually uses the term the Jews not to refer to Jews in general but to refer to those who live in Judea. They are for him the stereotype for those who oppose Jesus, especially the religious authorities who rejected his claims.

The people of Jesus' time had a variety of expectations about the appearance of one or more figures who would bring the current age to an end. The most common hope centered on the coming of a political messiah who would be a member of the royal line of King David. Elijah was also expected as a herald. There was also a hope for the revival of prophecy by a

prophet-like-Moses.

When questioned, John the Baptist rejects all of these identifications. He is only “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness” (v. 23; Isaiah 40:3). Likewise, the baptism that he practices points away from himself. It is only a preparation for the One already present but as yet undisclosed.

^{vii} **Reflection and Response**

In today’s gospel, John the Baptist is interrogated by representatives of the religious establishment. He sets a precedent for Jesus, who would later infuriate the authorities because he made their law-making and enforcing functions obsolete. Both men were suspect because they called people to an inner holiness. They epitomized the powerlessness of God’s chosen, little ones poised against the power of the temple authorities.

Just as in last week’s reading, John has a clear sense of who he is. Nevertheless, his questioners try to demean him: they suggest that because he is not Christ, Elijah or a prophet, he has no right to baptize. So in our day, we sometimes assume that the un-ordained have few rights and responsibilities compared to the clergy. We appropriate the religious experience of others because we do not trust our own. One of the great gifts of women’s spirituality has been to offset this discounting by seeing our own lives as the texts of God’s sacred revelation.

The reading from Isaiah catches this spirit: just as the prophet feels chosen and anointed by God to bring good tidings, to heal and liberate, so should we. Were it not for our intervention in many situations, God’s presence would not be brought to bear there. Yet it would be as wrong to overvalue ourselves as to undervalue our gifts. Isaiah and John the Baptist know distinctly that they do not act on their own, but draw from God’s power within them.

Most people engaged in ministry would agree that they stumbled into it somehow. Some grace that they cannot explain leads them through their work, overcoming their personal confusion, empowering them with the Spirit.