

March 2, 2014
Sunday Morning Service
Series: John
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to study John 1:19-28.

1. List some reasons why John the Baptist attracted so much attention.
2. Why did the priests and Levites wonder if John was Elijah or the Prophet?
3. Explain the connection between the question about John being Elijah and Jesus telling the disciples that John was Elijah.
4. What did the religious leaders and the people in general expect the Christ to be like?
5. Why did these representatives imply that John should not be baptizing?

THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS **John 1:19-28**

John is a horrible example of effective church planting. As God often does, His plan for John was an anomaly, a miracle that cannot be copied and would not work if it was copied. God sent His chosen servant into the wilderness. He inspired John to live like a hermit, a total recluse, who lived off the land. Then He gave a message to John that was completely unacceptable. He told John to preach repentance of sin. In fact, John told the religious leaders in his day that they were a brood of vipers who God was going to judge if they didn't repent

of sin (Matthew 3:7-9). And then, instead of having John build an attractive building on Main Street in Jerusalem, God sent multitudes of people out to him in the wilderness. That is not how to establish an effective ministry under normal circumstances.

God delights to work abnormally. While John was an anomaly, it is also true that he established some very important principles that we can follow as we give an answer for the hope that is in us. When the people investigated who John was, and when they requested an explanation, John immediately pointed to two truths. One was the fact that he was simply a messenger God had chosen according to His sovereign design centuries earlier. And two was that he was not the point of focus—Jesus Christ was.

Here are two simple and important principles for us to practice when we have opportunity to give a reason for the hope that is in us. Know who you are in relation to God, and know who you represent.

“Who Are You?” (vv.19-22)

The representatives from Jerusalem asked John who he was. His answer was who he was not. He said, “I'm not the Christ” (vv.19-20). Obviously, they posed the question because they wanted to know. John the apostle recorded the situation with these words: *And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” (v.19).*

The people investigated John because it looked like something was happening that had not happened in a long time. God's nation Israel had not received a message from God through a prophet in 400 years (since Malachi). If this was God's prophet, preaching God's message, he was a big deal. The indication based on the response of the populace was that they thought he was a big deal. Matthew told us that *Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him (Matthew 3:5).*

In light of the popular response, the religious leaders wanted to know about this preacher. So, the apostle wrote that the Jews sent priests and Levites. The term *Jews* could refer to the people as a whole who were no doubt curious about John. But is more likely that the apostle used the term *Jews* consistently throughout his Gospel to talk about the leaders in Jerusalem who opposed Jesus and John the

Baptist. Therefore, in this text, the “Jews” refers to people who had some authority in religious matters (the Pharisees, v.24). Those authorities sent these representatives.

They sent priests who were among the religious leaders themselves. The priests were in charge of the sacrifices and all the temple ministry stuff. According to God’s plan, they were supposed to serve as mediators between the people and God. In reality, their position was more of a political thing. Many of the priests were Pharisees. They also sent Levites. Originally, according to God’s plan, the Levites were the helpers in the temple services. They were the guys who did more of the manual labor requirements. It is also interesting to note that the infamous temple guard was made up of Levites. Maybe they served as body guards for the priests in this case.

There they were, out in the wilderness near the Jordan River, because they were investigating. They wanted to know who John was. Obviously he was someone special. Was he God’s mouthpiece, a preacher in the line of the Old Testament prophets? Who better to ask than John himself?

John replied to their inquisition with testimony to the truth. The apostle wrote that this was John’s testimony, his witness. It is as though John was on the witness stand in a courtroom and the priests were prosecuting him. But it was not all negative for John. It appears that he was glad to answer their inquiry. He illustrated well for us what Peter meant when he taught us. *But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you (1Peter 3:15).* We should count opportunities to witness for Christ as a privilege not a bother. Would to God that more people would ask us, “Who are you?” Maybe we don’t appear to be special like John was.

In response to the inquisitors’ question, John positively stated who he was not. *He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ” (v.20).* One thing that is certain from this verse is that John confessed the truth emphatically. He didn’t just talk or mumble something. He declared the truth. This particular Greek word (*homologeo*) is also used to describe a situation in which the person is so emphatic that he takes an oath. John wanted the priests to make no mistake about who he was not. He insisted that he was not the Christ. When did the priests ask that?

There is not indication in John’s Gospel that the priests posed that particular question. But the passage is full of implications. It appears that the people were anticipating the coming of Messiah. There seemed to be a heightened expectation that God was ready to do something in Israel. The people were certainly tired of Rome ruling over them. The problem is that there was not a lot of agreement about who or what Messiah would be. Some groups actually expected two different Messiahs—one who would be priestly and one who would be political. Add to that the fact that all seemed to agree that Messiah would be the prophet like Moses that God had promised (Deut. 18:15) and you have a situation where people might have looked for a Prophet, a Priest, and a King. They got all three in Jesus.

It is obvious from John’s reply that the “Christ” concept was common discussion. Almost everyone longed for the coming of God’s “anointed one.” Even if they could not agree who or what He would be. John emphatically denied that he was the Promised One. He said, “I’m not Elijah or the Prophet” (vv.21-22). This is beginning to sound like the game “Twenty Questions From the Bible” where the panel asks repeated questions in order to discover what object the moderator is thinking about. In this case, *And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No” (v.21).*

Was John the reincarnated Elijah? Nope. Why did they ask that? To this day, the devout Jews expect that Elijah will come before the Messiah arrives. They assume there is good reason for this expectation because Malachi, the last prophet before God went silent, promised, *“Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 3:1).* He identified this messenger more specifically when he said, *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes” (Malachi 4:5).* Devout Jews are still watching for Elijah. That is why there is still an empty chair at the table for Elijah when the Jews celebrate the Passover Supper.

Jesus explained to the disciples that “Elijah” had indeed come and the people missed him. When Peter, James, and John accompanied Jesus down the mountain, they *asked him, “Then why*

do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands” (Matthew 17:10-12). Therefore, in a figurative sense John was Elijah, but he was not a reincarnation of the famed prophet. The people in John’s day were not thinking “figuratively”. They expected Malachi’s prophecy to be fulfilled literally by a reincarnated Elijah. But in fact, John the Baptist came in the power and spirit of Elijah as the angel had promised his father Zechariah, *“And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:17).* The people didn’t understand the fulfillment of the promise. It is even possible that John did not recognize himself in such a role.

So, was John the promised Prophet like Moses? Nope. This conclusion also came about because of an Old Testament promise. Moses had promised the people, *“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen” (Deuteronomy 18:15).* There was disagreement whether this would be a new prophet or a resurrected prophet such as Moses or Elijah. Notice that the very religious people took their arguments from Scripture even as we like to do. But, maybe to their disappointment, John was none of those ancient prophets. In fact, Jesus said that John (being the last of the OT prophets) was greater than any of them. *“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11a).*

As we can imagine, the delegates from Jerusalem were feeling the pressure. *So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” (v.22).* In essence, the authorities demanded some kind of an answer from John. John’s answer about who he was not did not suffice. These people were expected to bring useful information back to the authorities who sent them. So they pressed harder to find out what John would say about himself? This was a very important matter. We must remember that the religious leaders in Jerusalem were also the

political leaders. At issue all the time was “their position” which they sought to protect. So these representatives knew that John was being evasive and that was not acceptable.

John could have said, “I am the son of Zechariah the priest who enjoyed the miracle of God in that I was born to him in old age, and I was filled with the Holy Spirit.” But he didn’t. Or he could have answered, “I am a devout follower of God who has sacrificed every comfort in life to live out here in the wilderness, subsisting on a diet of locusts and honey.” But he didn’t. It is even possible that John could have said, “I am of the Essene community, a group of holy people separated unto God.” Or had he known what Jesus would say he could have answered, “I am the greatest of men born of women.”

However, John probably was not too concerned about what the leaders thought of him. He did not come to proclaim himself. He set a good example for us. When asked the reason for the hope that is in us, we need to be prepared to give a defense. The right answer is to just tell what Jesus has done to you. Maybe we could say that if the question is only about you and not Jesus (like the Pharisees who wondered what John would say about himself), only give name, rank, and serial number. Or better yet, handle it like John did. “What do you say about yourself, John?” they asked. John basically replied, “Well, let me tell you what God did.”

“I Am The Voice” (vv.23-28).

John replied, “I am the voice Isaiah promised” (vv.23-25). He preached the need to make straight the way of the Lord. *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” (v.23).* Seven hundred years earlier, God promised that there would be a voice crying out. Through Isaiah, God said, *A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3).* That probably didn’t sound too unusual since God chose many prophets to cry out His message.

But, no voice had been crying out God’s message for 400 years before John. The message that voice would cry is: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” That is what John was doing. How odd that the forerunner would announce the King’s arrival out in the

wilderness. This is in keeping with God's way. The King Himself would come to His people in meekness and humility, born in a stable to lowly people, living as an itinerant teacher, and entering the capitol city meek and riding on a donkey—just as Zechariah promised He would. *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey”* (Zechariah 9:9).

It is only fitting that the herald who was preparing the way would be a humble man preaching out in the wilderness. And yet he was doing a ministry that was anything other than unimportant. John said, “Go tell the religious leaders that I am the fulfillment of God's promise through Isaiah.” That is a very significant statement that seemed to fly right over the heads of the priests and Levites.

Okay, preaching might be acceptable, but not baptizing. Why was John baptizing? That is what the priests wanted to know. *They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”* (v.25). If John was not the Christ, or Elijah, or the promised Prophet, why was he baptizing? Baptism was a public declaration of identification. In the minds of the priests, this would be identification with the Jewish religion, a matter of becoming a proselyte. John didn't have authority to do that.

Their great concern was not that John was preaching repentance of sin, but that he was breaking the Pharisee's rules about baptizing. Don't neglect to see the simple explanatory statement: *Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.* (v.24). Now the Pharisees were the ones who protected the traditions jealously. Obviously, John was not playing by the rules. If he was not the expected “deliverer” or herald of the “deliverer,” he had no business enlisting people in Judaism. But that isn't what John was doing. The Pharisees were so blind to truth they could not understand that John was indeed the “Elijah” they were looking for.

More than that, John explained that “The Prophet is among you” (vv.26-28). Water baptism wasn't the important issue to John. *John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”* John did not deny that he was baptizing people. It was true that John baptized with water (v.26a).

But, he was not enlisting people in the Jewish religion. The people who came to him were Jews by birth—they didn't need that kind of baptism. He was identifying people with the repentance of sins. But instead of defending his baptizing, John shifted the focus to Christ.

The people were not even aware that the longed-for Prophet was among them (v.26b). The Christ was alive and among them and they were unaware of it. How could their promised Deliverer not be known? Even when they met Him, they refused to know Him. He came to His own and His own would not receive Him (v.11).

The priests focused on John, but John focused on the One to whom he was a subordinate (v.27). While they were blind to the existence of the promised Christ, they were very concerned about John who was attracting a lot of attention. John insisted that he was not worthy to do the work the most menial slave does for his master. The Prophet for whom John was preparing the way was so much more superior. Yet the Prophet said that John was the greatest of men born.

These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing (v.28). We know that the place was not Bethany on the slopes of Mt. Olives, just outside Jerusalem. There is no place to baptize there. We also know that it was east of the Jordan, but we do not know where. Probably John had been out there in the wilderness for some time. He must have been twenty-nine or thirty years old at this point (a few months older than Jesus). And probably nothing was heard of John for many years. Then one day, it was time for John to begin the ministry of preparing the way for Christ, and he started preaching in the wilderness.

John's ministry does not make sense to human wisdom. No one would announce the promised King out in the wilderness. When he did announce the King's arrival, he did not preach a positive message. He preached a message of confessing and repenting of sin. He did not try to please the accepted religious authorities. No, John's method did not make sense to human wisdom, but this was God's plan. The arrival, ministry, and sacrifice of Messiah was cloaked in humility. The chief announcer of Christ was cloaked in humility. Such humility was not acceptable to the religious establishment.

Here is the lesson for us. We who are responsible to announce Jesus Christ's sacrifice as the only means for forgiveness of sin tend

to stand ministry on its head. In an effort to do the best we can with what God has given, we often forget that God's plan is to use the weak and small things for His glory. As a result of our desire to attract attention to the gospel, we tend to attract attention to ourselves. Therefore, we try to entertain people into salvation, we try to entice people to add Christ, when we should be telling them to die to self. Instead of loving people into a relationship with Christ, we prefer that they love us first. John left us an important example of always focusing the attention on Christ.