

## **“Someone You Do Not Know”**

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First in a series on the Gospel of John, chapter 1

John 1.19-28

September 7, 2014

Now this was the evidence John gave when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He was quite open about it. He did not try to deny it. “I am not the Messiah,” he said.

They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.”

Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 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.’”

Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, “Why then do you baptise if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” “I baptise with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

John 1.19-28 (NIV alt)

*John was attracting attention to himself. Though it turns out he did not want to. Attention? Yes! Himself? No.*

*John was strange. Scary even. Still, people came to him.*

*He was far away from everything; the Wilderness was not well-travelled. But they came to him.*

*He was baptising, plunging people into the river. Jews did that, but just for converts, people of the nations who were becoming Jews. Yet John was telling good children of Israel that they needed baptism too. Everyone must start over, and get right with God. And many came.*

*Something was going on. Now it was Yohanan's problem.*

*You would think working in the Holy City as a priest of the Lord would be all excitement and inspiration. Of course, Yohanan felt greatly honoured, following his fathers before him. But just starting out like he was, he got the jobs no one wanted. Like this "John" file, put on his desk.*

*Yohanan started investigating close by, in a village near Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Folks there still remembered little Johnny and his family. Fine people, they said. John's father was a priest. (That's good!). No suggestion of trouble. They remembered John as very serious and devoted to the Lord. Something strange about his parents being uncommonly old when he was born. (Also, some mention of family up in Galilee . . . where was it . . . Nazareth. Nothing there.)*

*With such little information, Yohanan grabbed some colleagues. They trekked out to John's base of operations, the Jordan river. They had to see John themselves. "What is he up to? Who does he think he is?"*

## II

*It was easier than they expected. Also, more confounding than ever.*

*Before they could look around, or even get their notebooks out, John was right there, in front of them. Eye to eye with Yohanan. "I am not the Messiah!"*

*Okay . . . good to know. That was the rumour. The whole nation was boiling with speculation. When will God (finally!) send us a new king, a new David to get rid of our enemies, throw off our oppressors, restore holiness to the land and set Israel free?*

You can see why, can't you? Things aren't good. Right? You know. God's gotta do something! But there are so many "messiahs," too many fakes, false hopes and dangerous fervour. So we have to know.

*"Okay then, John. If that's not what you're about, what then? Are you . . . Elijah?"*

*Centuries ago, God took that great prophet right up into heaven. Some say he is coming*

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<sup>1</sup> Ein Karem, near Jerusalem, is the traditional home of Zechariah and Elizabeth from Luke 1. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ein\\_Karem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ein_Karem), and also my sermon from December 16, 2012, "Locating Christmas: Blessed in Ein Karem."

*back, heralding God's new day. When people are desperate, they hope for such things. You know. "Some say you are playing that part, John!"*

No.

*"Are you another prophet, then? Maybe the like Moses, who will lead God's people as he did? Is that what you're up to?"*

No.

*"Help us out John. We can't make sense of it. You're out here, plunging people into the river, telling us all we need to repent and get right with God. Come on! Tell us something. At least then we can go back and make our report."*

*"Forget the report. Who are you?"*

Good question, for us now. You need to know if this is worthwhile, right? Forget trekking to the wilderness. (I'm not talking about camping!) I'm talking about this Sunday morning, in September.

Lots of people say lots of things. Scamming us with hope, meaning, life, and promises of \$20,000,000 from Nigeria. Here we are. Speaking confidently of the presence of God. Spreading rumours of grace, whispers of forgiveness. Of healing that gets deep and matters most. Of "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done." God's kingdom of peace and justice, God's will of reconciliation and wellness.

Is it right?

Stand yourself in Yohanan's sandals, and look the baptizing man in the face. "Who are you, John?"

III

*"I'm the voice!"*

*"I'm the voice, in the wilderness."*

When you're stuck out there . . . lost your way . . . been left behind . . . low on water, out of food . . . stumbling from rock to rock, looking for the right one to die beside . . . and then there's a voice. Hear it? Crying out? For you?

John says, “I’m the voice.”

John the Voice is not the word. But without the voice, the Word cannot be heard.

John the Voice is not the speaker. With it, the Speaker says “I am here . . . in your wilderness!”

She’s down on the sidewalk. A crowd has gathered round. She’s hurt bad. Doesn’t look good. Then, a siren. Coming closer. The siren is not the help. It’s just sound. But it tells you help is coming.

*“I’m the voice. The siren. The call!”* says John.

*“Get ready! The Lord is coming! Get set! Help is on the way!”*

#### IV

*“But John, what’s with all this baptism stuff.”*

*[Move to church’s font.] “You noticed. Baptism is about everything I’m talking about. And it sure attracts attention. You should see the crowd that comes when we have one! It’s a sign. You don’t want to miss the sign. But pay attention to what the sign points to . . . to whom the sign is pointing.”*

*“For among you, is someone you do not even know. You’ve come here to find out about me,”* says John. *“I’m not even good enough to tie the shoes of this Someone among you.”*

Much later, a bunch of people were together. They had actually known this “Someone,” but it had not ended well. It was a few days later. You know, when you start writing “Thank-You” cards for the funeral. They knew the Someone was gone. But then, there he was, as good as . . . no, better than new, Jesus, standing among them. (This happened at least twice.)<sup>2</sup>

Another time, this Someone promised— and he keeps his promises! — Jesus promised that whenever a bunch of us are together in his name, even just two or three of us, he is going to be here.

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<sup>2</sup> The Gospel of John relates two episodes when this happened after Jesus’ resurrection, in 20.19 and 20.26.

Do we see him, here among us?

V

Over the next while, we are going to be meandering through the “Gospel According to John.” Gospel means “good news.” It is like the best headline imaginable. The John who wrote this account was a different “John” than John the Baptizer; there were many “Johns.”

As we do this meandering, many things will grab our attention. Many things around here, in our congregation’s life, grab our attention. Baptizing John grabbed people’s attention. Yet it only matters if it leads us deeper to Jesus, who is among us.

Why are you here? For what are you looking? For whom are you looking?

We come with our own ideas, our own questions, our own perspectives, our own sense of what we need. Excellent! They came to Baptizing John with their ideas, questions, perspectives, needs. That was excellent, for starters. Then John began taking them outside all that, so they could start seeing new. Someone new.

Jesus is most unexpected!

This is what we are about. Jesus, who is in our midst, even when we do not know him. We are about being with him, receiving from him, learning him, following him, loving him.

Not just here. Wherever he is. Wherever he takes us. There was nothing particularly religious about that wilderness, or that river. But that was where he was. There are many places like that. Every place is like that. And we are all about being there.

For among us there, he will stand.

As for Yohanan, the young investigating priest. I made him up. Though he might be real. We’ll have to see what he does.

Also, what we do. Especially, what Jesus is doing among us. Amen.