

We hear again this Sunday about John the Baptist. But unlike last week's reading from Mark, John's gospel gives us very few details about John. In fact, we simply have a report of the priests and Levites from Jerusalem coming to him and asking, "Who are you?"

John's response is most remarkable in the way he chooses to answer – because rather than tell them who he is, he makes known his identity by telling them who he is not.

Expectations for the messiah were rampant in the first century among the people of Israel, and so was their preconceived notion of what the messiah would be. And yet before they even ask John, are you Elijah, are you the prophet, he declares, "I am not the Messiah."

When they push him further John tells them simply in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." Not even I am the one, I am he who cries out; but I am the voice of one crying out, "Make straight the way of the Lord." John's response doesn't seem to fit their question because he answers about the One who is coming rather than about himself. John points away from himself toward Jesus. And so, John is the first witness to Jesus. It is his first testimony that will lead others to faith. His "I am not" is in pointed contrast to Jesus' "I am."

But even after John makes this answer they persist in asking questions that will fit him into their expectations. They want their answer – not God's answer. And even as they continue to ask their questions, John simply gives them God's answer. So often I think we, too, ask the wrong questions, wanting the answers we want from God; so that God needs to change our questions, before we can begin to hear the truth that is God's answer.

So we can expand our thinking about the season of Advent to include not only a time to celebrate the gracious gift that is our hope, but also a time when our very questions about our own identities can be reframed and reformed by God.

Because in Advent, like with John the Baptist, our identities, too, are at stake. Shouldn't we also answer the question "Who are you?" for ourselves in relation to Jesus, to God incarnate? Isn't that ultimately and most importantly how we need to understand ourselves?

And yet, to state the obvious, like John, we are not, any of us, the Messiah. We may sometimes like to think we are the sole rescuer for another, the one with the power to fix the problems in our families, or in our communities. Or perhaps we are all too willing to elevate another to the status of savior. But clearly the position of messiah has already been filled.

And like John, knowing clearly who we are not opens us to the faith that draws us toward that which we are. And then we can make certain claims for ourselves. We are anointed people. We are in Christ and he lives in us. We are his hands and voice in the world. We are called to live out and proclaim through word and action God's justice, God's peace, God's love in this broken world. We are called to give voice to the nearness of the Kingdom of God with its redemption and salvation available to all. Like John the Baptist, by knowing clearly who we are not we are free to claim who it is that God knows each of us to be.

John's whole purpose was to prepare the way for Jesus. When we claim our identity we claim that role for ourselves as well. Ours is a ministry of preparing the way so that Jesus will find a welcome among us. Ours is a ministry of recognizing Jesus and pointing him out to others.

Advent is a season of hope, of expectation. It is a season to let God reframe our questions and make new our identity as children of God. Advent is a time to watch and wait, to prepare for the coming of God among us, the coming of Christ again. It is a time that points us toward the mystery of Christmas and all its wonderful possibilities.

Even as John defines himself first by what he is not; and even as that is a good place for us to start when claiming our identity in relationship to Jesus; it might be helpful to remember even briefly as we are moving every so swiftly toward it, what Christmas is not.

I think we live in a world of two Christmases. And while they seem to overlap, one of them is Christmas – and one of them is not. It is the world that invites controversy over what to call the State House tree.

Even as we have found our own ways to be quiet, to prepare during this season, “Christmas” is already happening out there. We can wear our Advent First buttons but we can't stem the tide of the culture in which we live – and we really can't help but being caught up in it ourselves.

But the Christmas out there is more often than not a Christmas of false expectations. Just ask the family that is struggling to make ends meet, or folks dealing with broken relationships, with illness and death. This is the Christmas for which the Today Show runs a segment every year on how to cope with holiday stress. Expectations run high for wonderful family gatherings, an abundance of gifts carefully and thoughtfully chosen, of parties with friends and neighbors. But it can just as easily be a painful and empty time as it can be one full of Kodak moments.

The Christmas of our Savior's birth is not only one of expectation, but of promise. And it is a promise that has already been kept. Jesus is God's gift to us. We have simply to accept it; to say yes. This is the Christmas that will not disappoint. It is a time full of rejoicing, a time full of joy and hope and believing through the power of the Holy Spirit who a little more than two thousand years ago came to a young woman named Mary and ensures for us our redemption and salvation.

This is the Christmas that demands our witness, and fills us with joy, no matter what else is going on in our lives. This is the Christmas for which we wait this and every season of Advent. This is the Christmas we proclaim for all the world to see and know the wonder of the Incarnation. This is the Christmas for which we pray, Lord Jesus, come soon.