

“Who are you?” That’s what those priests and Levites put before John the Baptist as he’s baptizing in Bethany across the Jordan. It’s also a question the world puts to us as Christians. “Who are you?” As we consider John’s answer, and why He said what He said, we’re guided in our own answer, taught about our own identity as Christians, the identity that lasts forever.

The Bible tells that the scene begins in this way: “And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’” What do they mean by this? It isn’t the most basic sense of the question, in other words, that they’re unaware of who this strangely dressed guy is baptizing people in the Jordan, and so they’re there to get his name, and where he’s from, and all that. No, they know all that.

How? For one, John is quite popular at this point. People are going out to him from Jerusalem and Judea and the whole surrounding region, as the Gospels tell us. News about John and who he was and what he was doing spread rapidly; it was what was bringing people out to him!

In addition to this, the priests and Levites would have known in a way that was much closer to home, so to speak. Remember, John’s father, Zechariah, was a priest. And the priests were all descendants of Aaron, going way back. So this isn’t just a faceless delegation going out to John. These are his relatives, his kin. He likely would have gotten to know many of them as his father mingled with their fathers, carrying out their priestly duties. These priests and Levites, they would have known exactly who John was.

And that gives their question all the more punch. Again, this isn’t just an initial introduction. “Who are you” here is more along the lines of “Who do you think you are?” Or “What on earth are you doing?” Or “We thought we knew you.”

As the son of a priest, John should have been a priest himself. He should have done what his father did – come to the temple, offer the sacrifices and prayers, lead the ceremonies and feasts. In doing this, John would’ve had a nice, comfortable life, being one of the respectable, well-thought-of members of Jerusalem. Just carry on with business as usual, don’t rock the boat, and everything will keep going.

But as we know, John didn’t follow his father Zechariah as a priest. He forsook the comfortable linen robes of a priest for the rough camel’s hair garments that Elijah had worn. He turned away from the familiar life in Jerusalem and went instead into the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey, likely sleeping in a rough shelter or perhaps just under the stars. And especially, He didn’t carry out the usual, comfortable rhythms of temple worship, but instead called out for the people to repent, to turn from their sins, and to live in accord with God’s word.

And John spoke this to everyone, be they prostitutes and tax collectors or Pharisees and Sadducees. John was a prophet, and to his family, who were all priests and expected him to be a priest, this was alarming. Even more alarming was the fact that those Pharisees were their bosses. The

Scripture notes that these priests and Levites “had been sent from the Pharisees.” If John attacks them, the guys who are in charge, then it’s going cause problems!

When they press John on who he thinks he is that gives him the authority to do what he’s doing, they put forward several answers they think might explain.

It seems the first one, implied by John’s first answer, is asking if he is the Christ. Is he the one long awaited by the people of Israel who will set them free? John’s reply? “I am not the Christ.” Hidden in John’s wording, and made clear just a little later in the conversation, is that the Christ is in fact there, but He’s not John.

The priests and Levites try another option. “What then? Are you Elijah?” Through the prophet Malachi, the Lord had foretold that He would send a second Elijah before the Day of the Lord came. And even though Jesus would declare John to be this Elijah, John at this time humbly refuses to take the honor for himself. John is following the proverb, “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.”

They then ask John, “Are you the Prophet?” While John is indeed a prophet, “The Prophet” refers to the one foretold by Moses, the one who is in fact, the Christ. And so John, his answers getting shorter and shorter simply says, “No.”

After all this, the priests and Levites finally say, exasperated, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” The investigators can’t go back empty-handed; they have to have something! Who does John think he is?

And here, John finally does give them something. But he doesn’t point to anything in himself. Instead, John points to who he is in Christ. He replies, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

John is not the Christ, not the prophet, and unwilling to claim for himself the title of Elijah. Instead, he describes himself in a way that points to another. He grounds his identity in Christ.

First, John is saying that his purpose is grounded in Christ. John says he’s a voice. What gives a voice purpose? It’s message! Without something to clearly speak, a voice is just a bunch of incoherent noise. It’s only when that voice is used to speak that it is doing what it’s supposed to. John’s identity isn’t in who he is, but in the one whose way he is foretelling.

Second, John grounds his certainty in Christ. He isn’t out in the wilderness on a hunch, or because it felt like the right thing to do. He’s out there because God had ordained it in ages past. Isaiah spoke these words hundreds of years before John was born, and they were part of God’s plan in eternity before that.

Even though John may be tempted to doubt because he isn’t doing what the world would say he should, he can dispel those doubts by seeing how he is fulfilling what was spoken in God’s unshakable word.

Third, John has his hope placed in Christ. This is seen in his words toward the end of his discussion with the priests and Levites. John says, “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.”

He knows that his calling isn’t futile, that he’s out in the wilderness suffering hardships for no reason. No, he’s out there baptizing so that the Christ might be revealed to Israel, which is exactly what happens when Jesus is baptized. And this baptism will be necessary to fulfill all righteousness, as Jesus will declare. John knows that the Christ is coming after him, and coming to save him, and all who would believe, from the curse of sin and death.

No matter what the future holds – and for John, that includes imprisonment and martyrdom – Christ is coming. It doesn’t matter that John is different, strange, even upsetting to the world. John is who he is because of Christ, and in this, he has purpose, certainty, and hope.

These gifts are graciously given to us today as Christians who ground our identity in Christ. And they’re essential, because like John, the world will often look at faithful Christians and ask, “Who are you?” “Why are you like this?” “We thought we knew you!”

Christians will often operate on a different moral code than the rest of the world. As followers of Christ, His word, the Bible, is our foundation. In it, God tells us what is right, what is wrong, how we are to live, how we are saved – it’s all set by God. And as we trust in God, we trust that what He has told us in His word is for our best, even if we don’t understand it or feel it.

On the other hand, while our culture has been historically influenced by Christianity, that effect is decreasing, as more and more it’s important to seek your own truth, your own happiness, your own fulfillment. It goes against much of contemporary thought to say that right and wrong aren’t up for someone to decide for himself, and when you do, you’ll probably get asked, “Who do you think you are?”

Christians will also be weird and different because we are to live our lives not for the sake of this life, but for the sake of the life to come. St. Peter writes about this when he tells the Church, “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.”

The Christian life is one of repenting of sin, rejoicing in the free gift of salvation given to us, and showing forth the light of Christ through good works. It is about building up treasures in heaven, even when that means giving up the treasures of this life.

The world will look at this with confusion, and even anger. Peter continues, “With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you.” The world is all about the here and now, getting what you can while you can, and enjoying yourself as much as possible. This might be seeking prestige, like the Pharisees mentioned in our reading. It might be being well thought of and fitting in, like those priests and Levites wanting John to fit in. It might be just living it up and doing what feels best, like Herod pursuing his brother’s wife.

To the world, Christians appear to waste their time, their money, their lives chasing after the wind. And they’ll ask, confused, or even angry, “Who are you?”

But again, we, like John, are blessed with those same gifts of purpose, certainty, and hope when we find our identity in Christ. Through the word, we know that we are created for a purpose, that no human being is an accident. God created you for a reason, established long before you actually came into this world.

The ultimate reason is of course to dwell with Him in paradise forever, to love and be loved by Him. But the Lord has also established our days in this life. In Psalm 139 we hear, “In Your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” You may not understand why things go the way they do in your life, but you can be absolutely certain that God has a reason for it, and that it’s for your good!

As a Christian, you can also have certainty through your identity in Christ. Christ has given you His word, the Bible, which is not just a book of myths and fables designed to teach good morals. It is God’s own word, a record of absolute truth. When the world would try to relativize everything, make truth into some squishy thing that can be formed and bent however needed, you can know that you stand on the solid rock of God.

You don’t have to worry about appeasing some crowd or conforming whatever the current thought is. When you can say, “The Bible says,” then you can say that the unchanging, perfect, holy God has spoken, and His word is far above man’s. Heaven and earth will pass away, but Christ’s word will never pass away.

Because Christ has come and joined Himself to you, you always have hope. And this isn’t the world’s hope: wishful thinking. No, this is the Christian’s hope, which is certain. You can know that God did in fact come as the Christ, just as John foretold. You can know that Jesus offered up His life – the infinitely-valuable life of God – to take away the sins of the world. You can know that on the third day He rose in His body from the grave.

And you can be certain that He did it all for you, “to give you a future and a hope,” as the familiar words from Jeremiah say. When you sincerely repent, you can be sure that your sins have been wiped away. When good days come, you don’t have to nervously wonder how long they’ll last and what you’ll do when they end, but simply rejoice in the day which the Lord has made. And when hard days come, your hope in Christ will assure you that He has already set the day when they’ll get better.

You can know that, when this life ends, the Lord Jesus has gone ahead to prepare a place for you in His Father’s house, because, as He says, “If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

This purpose, this certainty, this hope are all yours in Christ. When the world, when your neighbor, when even your family come to you and ask, “Who are you,” you don’t have to worry about thinking up some grand or pleasing answer. You can simply say that you’re a Christian. You are in Christ. And that endures forever.

In the name of Jesus, amen.