



“A Voice Crying Out in the Desert”

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No one in Israel had ever done what the Baptist was doing in the Jordan. It was unheard of to baptize repentant sinners publicly one by one. Word of the novelty got around. People came from far and wide to wade toward him in the water or watch in wonderment from the shore.

Who was this man anyway? What in the world was he up to? Everyone asked these questions. Some visiting priests from Jerusalem had the nerve to fling them in the Baptizer’s face. His answer was a model of intriguing concision: he told them he was *not* the Christ, *not* Elijah, *not* the Prophet. They would find in him no king, wonderworker, or lawgiver.

John’s threefold denial only baffled his questioners the more. If he wasn’t Christ, Elijah, or Prophet, then what was his baptizing *for*? What on earth did it mean? These men expected an answer they could get their hands around, an answer that would make sense of the widely appealing behavior John had made peculiarly his own. “Who *are* you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us?”

It was a natural cycle of curiosity: people went out to see for themselves the strange events they’d heard were taking place in the desert, and the activity they witnessed there

led them to question John’s identity. Watching what John did led them to wonder who he was.

John’s reply revealed that he’d worked through that question himself. His identity was not to be found in splendid or rugged isolation, nor did his activity result from self-determination. Rather, he describes himself in Scripture as someone always and everywhere *in relation* to Another, whose sandal strap he was unworthy to loose. John confessed himself to be nothing more than a “voice” clearing a path in the darkness for the Word of Life to shine forth God’s saving light.

John knew very well that “he was not the light.” Rather he had been “sent from God” in order to “testify to the light.” His baptizing bore witness that “the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.” And that light bearer, John claimed, was “one who is mightier than I.”

You did not need to hear these clarifying words to sense that there was more to the man clothed in camel’s hair than met the eye. For according to St. Mark, “all the country of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem” went out to him to be plunged into the waters of hope. They came in advance of explanation. They didn’t wait on the priests’ questions and John’s answers to respond to his unauthorized, out-of-nowhere call to repentance. They simply stepped away from the ground beneath their feet into the flowing stream of the Jordan, not knowing where it might carry them, but trusting that it would wash them up on a new shore, where the crooked, conflicted paths of their life could be made straight.

Watching what John did led his observers to wonder who he was. And that led them to wonder who *they* were and what they were doing or not doing about it. Is it any different for us, looking on 2,000 years later? Don't we too long to "recognize" the "One who is mightier," to "believe in His name," and to receive "power to become children of God"? That is still the inviting promise of the voice crying in the desert.