John 1:6-8. 19-28

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ 20He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ 21And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ 22Then they said to him, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ 23He said,  
‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,  
“Make straight the way of the Lord” ’,  
as the prophet Isaiah said.

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25They asked him, ‘Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’ 26John answered them, ‘I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’ 28This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

How the Spirit Leads

Chutzpah would have been how the priests and Levites described the behavior of John the Baptizer. John had no authority from the Temple leaders to embark on his own mission of baptism (i.e. purification). He was crossing boundaries. Trespassing on the priests’ territory. Who did he think he was? That’s exactly what they intended to find out when they sent their delegation into the wilderness to the site of John’s ministry.

Imagine how you would feel if you went to work one day and learned that someone new to the company was doing tasks that you normally do…or someone opened a shop like yours down the block, and all your customers were going to him. How might I feel if a new church opened in Tottenville Square, and half of you stopped coming here? Honestly, I would be alarmed at first, because I would feel that I was not performing as well as I should. Our vocation is integrally tied to our sense of self-worth, and if someone else starts doing our job better than us, or takes our job from us, or is attracting more attention than us, we get scared and we get jealous.

Such a reaction results from our being *self*-centered. Self-centered is not the same as selfish or egotistical. Self-centered simply means that our main concern is for ourselves because that’s all that we really know. God is not a consideration in our decisions. Most people go through life without involving God in their decisions. Businesses, governments, even churches at times fail to consider God in their decisions. Instead decisions are based on past performance and results – if it worked before, it will work again. Churches continue to do the things that have been successful in the past – some becomes so set-in-their-ways that the Spirit of God is suffocated.

In today’s reading, we find the priests and the Levites have fallen into the same trap. They have been observing their rituals of purification the same way for hundreds of years, so when John begins doing things differently, in an unorthodox manner, they are confused, upset, and resistant to this new method. And how could a person be declared clean by someone who was not a priest or a Levite? And why were so many people following this charlatan, this baptizer?

To the self-centered people of the world, the actions of the God-centered person seldom make much sense. Why attend worship service when you could be at the beach, or the golf course, or a movie, or in bed? Why give money to people you don’t even know when you could spend it on nicer clothes or a car or a vacation? Why volunteer so much time into cooking and serving and cleaning and attending meetings when you’re not even paid for it?

Why? Thankfulness! You, like those who went into the wilderness, have heard John’s message of repentance and forgiveness. You’ve looked into your heart and found that it was not as it should be, just as the world is not as it should be, and you’ve sought God with a contrite heart. God, in turn, has shown you his grace and forgiveness in Christ and has assured you of an eternity in his presence. And so you rejoice in thanksgiving! Furthermore, you have given your heart to God and let him reshape it. Now your life reflects God’s love, and your actions are becoming in tune with God’s will.

In fact, you begin to define yourself in terms of God’s will. Note how John the Baptist responded to the priests and Levites when they asked him who he was. The Messiah? No. Elijah? No. The prophet? No. John said he was just a voice in the wilderness telling us to prepare the way for the Lord. When the priests and Levites asked him why he was baptizing, John, rather than explaining, simply directed his inquisitors’ attention to Jesus: “Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” (verses 26-27).

And this is the entire mission of the God-centered person: to point the way to Jesus Christ, who was, and is, and is to come. He came to free us from sin and death. He remains with us, working through us, to transform the world, to build God’s kingdom on earth. And he will come again, to reign eternal.

It’s no longer about us; it’s about *him.* God’s great work of salvation needs to be shared with all humanity, through our words and through our hands. God is with us, and everyone needs to know this. So let us celebrate Jesus this Advent season. Let us celebrate the One to whom we owe our lives, the One whom we worship, the one is coming again in glory.