

It was my 3rd, and final, class with Mr. Dahl, one of the history teachers at my high school. Having been in his other classes twice before, I knew the routine. The first day of class was, like many other classes, going over the syllabus, explaining what we'd be doing in the class, and yes, getting to know one another. Only in Mr. Dahl's class, it was a guarantee that the year would start off like this. (Slide 1). And as the song played, each person in the class was invited to introduce themselves. But this was far more challenging and far deeper than you might first imagine. Because Mr. Dahl did not simply want to know your name – he did want to know that – but what he wanted more than anything was to know who you were. It was a question of identity and as I look back on that time in high school, I realize how brilliant he was for doing it. Because we were all trying to figure out who we were. And in many ways, we still are.

(Slide 2) Who are you? It's the question that sits at the center of our human existence. And if we're honest with ourselves, it's the question that we dread because deep down, we haven't figured it out. We've been conditioned to believe that our identity is ours to shape and form, that we are the masters of our destiny, the ones tasked with becoming all that we can be. And more often than not, we feel woefully inadequate for such a monumental task and frightened at being discovered and exposed for not knowing who we are. And perhaps what's even more frightening in all of this, is that it's one very small step away from asking, "Why are you here?" The question of identity is closely linked to the question of purpose. We worry that if we don't know who we are, we won't have an answer for what our purpose is either. And no one wants to feel like they don't have a purpose.

Imagine being in John's shoes, er, sandals. You have all these religious leaders coming to you in what seems to be a slightly aggressive posture and tone, asking, nay, demanding that you tell them who you are. Who are you? At the core of your being who are you? And while you're at it, give us some sense, some indication as to why you are here? What purpose do you serve? What a troubling question indeed. How can one possibly put such a complex and rich and deep thing into words?

Which is why I love what John does here. Instead of jumping right in and trying to affirm himself – his identity, his purpose, his worth – he begins with an understanding of who he is not. (Slide 3). He is not the messiah, this much he knows. He's not Elijah and he's not the prophet. And you can almost sense that his understanding of himself is growing with each statement of who he isn't, until finally he can boldly and emphatically declare, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness." But

how does he get to that understanding? And likewise, how do we grow in our own understanding of who we are? How can one possibly be expected to try to defend and justify their mere existence? How is any such question fair to ask another person? In truth, it isn't. But it's also not something we need fear or spiral into an existential crisis over. You and I do not need to justify our existence in this world. No one does. Because God already has. (Slide 4)

John's identity and his purpose in the world stems from his relationship to God in Christ. In other words, who John is, is not determined by who he has decided himself to be, but by who God has called him to be. He is not the messiah and if he were to try to be, he would fail because it is not his identity; it is not his purpose. It is not who God has called him to be. But this doesn't make him any less. It doesn't make you or I any less. Rather, our identity and purpose is shaped and formed out of the call that God has placed upon us. And the call that has been given to us is that of witness. Interestingly, John is not referred to as the Baptist or baptizer in John's gospel. I don't believe that's an oversight. Because what the Gospel of John wants us to realize is that our calling is not so much to be baptizers and it is to be witnesses to the presence and activity of God in Christ.

My late mother-in-law, Carmen, God bless her, was a stickler about not pointing at people. "It's rude to point," she'd say. But I know that she'll hear me and the deep love I have for her when I say, John's job, your job, my job, our purpose is to be pointers. Who you are is a child of God. Who you are is a sinner redeemed by the grace of Christ. And as such, who you are called to be is a pointer. Because when you point, others look. (Slide 5). It's probably why my mother-in-law said it was so rude. But when the one we are pointing to is none other than the messiah, the Christ, the Savior, Emmanuel, God with us in the flesh, I think she'd make an exception.

In this season of Advent, we are reminded of who we are and with that, who we are called to be. Identity and purpose, molded and shaped and fused together. This is who we are. Beloved. Children of God. Recipients of grace. The unending rejoicers. The prayers. The thanks givers. The pointers to the one who sets all free. The ones whom God has called to this place and time for a world in need of new life, a world crying out for a reason for hope and peace and love and joy. Who are we? (Slide 6). We are all witnesses. Amen.