

*6There 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.*

*19This 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. 24Now 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.*

I have started Christmas shopping - the same me going into the same stores with the same results.

Where I found a dress for Sue last year I look for a dress for Sue again. A shirt for Matt in the places I have looked for a shirt for Matt before - a CD for Beth - a knick-knack for Katie from the usual places.

Everything looks the same and feels the same and I wonder why. I am searching for something new but the more malls and stores I find; the less any of it seems new.

I am looking for gifts to make hearts sing. But will I see them when they are right before my eyes? Will I know it when the perfect gift is in my hand? Or will I miss the gifts because they are right among all the things I have seen so many times before?

In the gospel today we hear of people sent to question John: "Who are you?" And John confessed, "I am not the Messiah."

The people were looking for the Messiah. The Messiah would lead them in victory over their enemies. Rome would be defeated. That is the gift they looked for from God. John was not the Messiah.

Then his questioners asked John, "Are you Elijah?"

For centuries parents taught their children that Elijah would come and bring the day of the Lord. All the hopes we heard in our first lesson of joy and good news and liberty Elijah would bring. But John said I am not Elijah.

“Are you the prophet?”

God’s people were waiting for a prophet like Moses, a new Exodus delivering them from bondage into the promised land of God’s tomorrow. But John the Baptist said, “I am not the prophet.”

“Who are you? What do you say about yourself?” they asked.

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’ I baptize with water but among you stands one whom you do not know.”

The people were looking for all sorts of things they knew – a king like David, Elijah returned from heaven – a prophet like Moses. But John spoke of one already among them whom they did not recognize.

I remember a Christmas Candlelight service. I was far from home – feeling alone. A flame passed from candle to candle and suddenly I was at home. In Silent Night being sung by the glow of candlelight distance was overcome.

I can understand why the people who came to John were seeking to connect him to their yesterdays. In the familiar aisles they were seeking the gift from God. But John was saying, “You won’t find him there.”

“Among you stands one whom you do not know.”

The old hymns, the answered prayers for health, the times of prosperity and abundance, God will come to us in these we tell ourselves.

But when God comes to us it is not in a mighty king but in a baby, fragile, dependent.

God comes to us not in a mighty warrior but in one put to death with criminals.

God comes to us not in the winners of this world but in the least – the hungry, the thirsty, the naked ones.

God is doing something new in Jesus.

And through him in you.