Isaiah 40:3-5, John 1:19-28

“Who are you?”

It is great to be back home. As I mentioned to the people in Russia this past Sunday, it is so nice for the first time in my life to be in a place that we consider a permanent home and not wondering what will be next in our life. But these past couple of weeks have been very different for us and for this church. For me personally I had an experience that could significantly change my life forever. No, it has nothing to do with the Russia trip, which we will report to you all on on June 24th, no it has nothing to do with my inching closer to my 50th birthday.

This past Friday at 8:47am my oldest daughter, Rachel, got her driver’s permit. Nothing is going to be the same again. All of a sudden I have gone from being a self-confident father to a somewhat concerned parent. You know, how we define ourselves, how we see ourselves, and how others around us see us has so much to do with what has happened or what is happening in our lives.

If I were to ask you who are you?, how would you respond? This trip to Russia made me think a lot about how we see ourselves and how others see us. To be surrounded by people that for 5 years in a very intense environment I had poured my life into and being with 5 others that are getting to know me but as of yet don’t have that historical concept of who we are made me think about that. Who you are is different in the eyes of your family, your church, your job.

You know, over this past year I have tried to really temper my missionary experiences because I didn’t want to be identified as that missionary pastor who has no concept of the way that we do things here in Lancaster County. Ultimately, how people see you is the reality whether you want it to be or not. Today, both of our Scriptures and especially our John Scripture deals with how John the Baptist was viewed by the world and who he says he is not, and who he is. He tells people that he is a voice, and we are to take that answer and apply it to our very own lives. The answer to the question of who are you should be: I am the voice that reflects the presence of God in my speech, in my actions, and in my thoughts. Let’s see if we can live that out.

**READ**

I had never worn make up before in my life. It was a bit unsettling to have a group of people surrounding you putting stuff on your face so you would look just right on live national television. The Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy had just put out a fairly disturbing survey on the quality of life of Africans in Moscow and the voices were shocking. Over 70% of Africans changed their daily routine to avoid situations of violence and conflict. 64% of Africans had been attacked at least once, and many more than once. Right away our survey got national and international attention with interviews and reports put out on BBC, CNN, NPR, Le Monde and others, and now the local English language television channel in Russia, which was long thought to be the voice of propaganda for the Russian government, wanted a live interview with me for the 8pm news.

I cut basketball practice short, made it to the studio in time, and the interviews went well, it went really well. I’ll send you a link to it in the next enews. You get to see me in make up. As soon as the interview was over and I walked out of the studio my telephone was ringing with an unknown number. When I answered it the man on the phone said he was from the FSB which is the newer and improved KGB. He asked me: Who are you?, and can we get together for coffee to discuss a few things. You don’t say not to that kind of request and it actually turned out to be an incredibly good meeting. In fact, that officer was able to arrest and put in jail someone for stabbing one of our members after church because he was black.

So to the question of who are you, we find that even in real life an honest and humble answer can go a real long way. Often it is in this type of a response where God’s glory is able to be revealed. This group that came back from Russia when they were asked who they were, they were able to point to the hours of work that was done in the basement without accolades to show that we are brothers in Christ. How you answer that question of who are you can have a major impact upon how people see you and how they see the God that you love and that you follow and serve.

In our 2nd Scripture John the Baptist is being interrogated by priests and Levites from Jerusalem. Three times, vs. 19, 22, and 25 in an indirect form, these religious leaders ask that questions from John the Baptist, who are you? Apparently his work was getting some notoriety. Those questioning, as we said, are priests and Levites and from Jerusalem. They were the ones primarily responsible for the ritual purifications that were needed to enter the temple. Don’t miss the importance of this. John is being examined by those principally responsible for the religious life of the Jews because many Jews were coming to him for answers.

If you look at vs.25 all of their questioning comes down to the question of who gave you the ability or the right to baptize? This was their area of expertise and John was encroaching on their territory. Remember, John is also the son of a priest, so they wanted to know, who are you. Who gave you the right to do things that only we are able to do?

John has to answer them and to each of their questions of who are you he provides an answer. Each of his answers are given in a way that would do us well to take note. There is an incredible amount of humility exhibited by John as he describes who he is. John affirms ultimately who Jesus is by describing who he is not. Let’s look at that, vs. 19, who are you? I am not the Messiah. I am not God. They didn’t even ask that question, he just provided that response. Are you Elijah, someone that all the nation is waiting for to take us to the end times, no. What about a prophet, someone who has God’s voice and would want others to listen. Well, in some ways yes, but not as you expect.

Each of these descriptions carry very specific responsibilities that John did not want to be identified with. Do you see how he prefers to identify himself? So far they know who he is not, but who are you? I am the voice. That is his answer. That takes us back to Isaiah, so we have to look at that now.

I just want to make sure that you are following this Scripture today. Our understanding of who we are is normally so built around common things that it is hard to see ourselves principally how God sees us or how God wants us to be and to act. The question leveled at John and at us today is: Who are you? The response John gives is: I am the voice which is a direct quote from Isaiah where we are going to break it down now.

Our Isaiah Scripture depicts a voice crying out. You need to know that the Israelites, those to whom Isaiah is writing here, are in exile. They have been forcibly removed from their homes and were marched to a foreign land. Isaiah is speaking to them out of a context of suffering, of no hope and he is telling them that when the voice comes and cries out, then and only then will the glory of the Lord be revealed. Then role of the voice was to speak so that this leveling will take place so that the glory of the Lord would be revealed.

We don’t really know what it is like to go into exile, do we? For 70 years the people of Russia were in exile. Where we worshipped was for 70 years a music studio where they recorded albums. Imagine if government officials came, kicked some of us out of the church and the rest they killed and this became a recording studio for Lancaster County. St. Peter and Paul where we worked that beautiful gothic cathedral was subdivided and turned into a storage area. The Russians know what it is like to be in exile, to live in a country without churches, without a clear sense of right and wrong. In some ways they are paying for that now.

Humility is seen as weakness and it flies in the face of what John says and does here. But isn’t that the case for us as well? Don’t we have a tendency to build ourselves up for people instead of humbly allowing our actions to speak for themselves. To the question of who are you, humility doesn’t come to our minds in putting Christ first as it does to John.

John turns the Who are you around to them asking, well then, who am I in the light of Jesus the Savior? And that is what we are called to do. Who are you, personally, how would you now answer that question? We would answer it in light of our name, our family, olur jobs. But when John the Baptist is asked he is able to answer it in a way that reflects Jesus’ life in his life.

Isn’t that our goal? Who are you we can describe verbally by never falling away from our testimony. John the Baptist in vs.19 is mentioned as one who had a testimony. His words raised Christ up and lowered himself. I must decrease so that he can increase was his way that verbally he described himself in light of Christ.

Also, in his actions he demonstrated who he was. That could potentially be one of the most powerful ways in which we are able to show who we are. How people see us behave and act will go a long way in defining who we are. Are we filling valleys and lowering mountains so the glory of the Lord could be revealed. Isaiah states that when all these things are done, then, and only then the glory of the Lord will be revealed. Who we are is easily discerned by our actions much more than our words.

Finally, how are we remembered has a lot to do with who we are. We have had a number of opportunities to remember the lives and the resurrections of people over these past weeks. Shirley Yinger’s service reminded me of how important it is for one’s testimony to be one that reflects Jesus Christ. Going back to Russia was strange because in some ways we received a heroes welcome. But the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives has to be what defines that legacy.

But we have to know our place. John said he wasn’t worthy to untie the sandal of the one who came next. He knew he was very replaceable. That is one thing that I learned in Russia was that in the body of Christ we are all to work in unison for the kingdom of God. But, no one is irreplaceable. God always raised people up who needed to be raised up so that his work could be done. Part of who we are is irreplaceable. John had the ability and we must as well have as part of our definition to the question, Who are you, the answer, replaceable.

I pray that every day we will be redefining in the light of Jesus Christ who we are. Amen.