

## Who's Who

### John 1:29-42

The first chapter of John bears some similarity to the pilot episode of a television series. In that first episode, the writers and director want to introduce all the main characters. In a television series, what we learn about the main characters in the first episode helps us understand them for the rest of the time the show is on the air and to see how they develop over the course of the series. John's narrative begins after the prologue, a hymn or poem that sets John's theological agenda. Once the narrative begins in verse 19, John focuses on identifying the characters of his gospel.

All the gospels introduce John the Baptist early in their narratives. John introduces him differently than the other gospels. The other gospels tell us something about John's preaching and ministry of baptism at the Jordan River. John skips over that part of the Baptist's ministry. We don't hear about the Baptist denouncing the religious leaders as "broods of vipers." John skips over the Baptist's thunderous preaching and the enraptured crowds flocking to hear him. John begins by having a delegation of religious leaders ask him point blank, "Who are you?" They must know what the Baptist has said and done, but they want to know who is saying and doing these things. The Baptist answers their questions by declaring intently who he is not. He is not the Messiah. He is not Elijah. The Baptist identifies himself only as a voice, calling out in the wilderness. The Baptist embodies the words of Isaiah. He prepares the way for Jesus. The Baptist wants the religious leaders to know that he is not the main character.

In the next scene, the Baptist does what he has come to do. He identifies Jesus. The scene itself is confusing. John divides this first chapter into a series of days, perhaps reflecting the days of Passover. This day is devoted to one dramatic and important speech by John the Baptist. Other than Jesus himself, we don't even know who else is on the set with the Baptist. John doesn't tell us who hears the Baptist's speech. No one responds to the Baptist; no one else speaks. All the focus is on the speech itself.

This speech by the Baptist gives Jesus his first title in the narrative part of John — a favorite of John's gospel. Directing his gaze at Jesus, John the Baptist announces, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" As we see in the rest of the chapter, no one phrase can identify Jesus fully. This title from the Baptist's lips, "Lamb of God," is only one way to identify Jesus. Calling Jesus "The Lamb of God" connects Jesus with the Passover in Exodus. This phrase stirred up memories. At the Passover, the people of Israel were spared from the angel of death, just before they escaped from slavery in Egypt. The Passover is a time of salvation, of forming the community, of celebrating God's power. Jesus is God's lamb. God acts again in Jesus for salvation.

John's speech tells us not only who Jesus is — the Lamb of God — but also what Jesus does, takes away the sin of the world. When the fourth gospel talks about "the world," it refers to all of creation. Jesus has come to take the sin and the darkness from God's creation. Jesus does more than just forgive sin; Jesus conquers sin. We live in a world full of sin and darkness. Sin surrounds us all the time, but sometimes it seems to erupt in overflows of hatred and violence. John makes sure we know who Jesus is and what he does.

The next group of characters to appear on the set are the disciples. Only the gospel of John tells us that at least some of Jesus' disciples originally were disciples of John the Baptist. In John, Jesus' first disciples

make a shift in loyalty. The Baptist himself encourages this shift in loyalty, by pointing away from himself and toward Jesus. Sometimes, claiming to be disciples of Jesus means that we place our loyalty to Jesus above some of our other ways of defining ourselves. Our loyalty to Jesus sometimes interferes even with our loyalty to our country. We are Christians first, Americans second. As Christians we cannot be so patriotic that we refuse to admit that our government commits sins in our name. Our first loyalty is to Jesus and to the truth.

John's picture of how the disciples make their change in loyalty is important. Here John differs from the other gospels. Matthew especially presents a scene in which the disciples immediately drop everything to follow Jesus. Some of us are just not that way. Some of us need for one reason or another to take our time. John allows for that. In John, the disciples begin with a conversation. As always seems to happen in John, the conversation doesn't quite follow. Jesus asks the potential disciples, "What are you looking for?" We can think of several answers that would make sense. "We're looking for spiritual fulfillment." "We're looking for a deeper connection to God." "We're looking for a way to make sense of our lives." Instead, they answer Jesus' question with another question, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" What in the world do they mean by that response? Are they trying to avoid Jesus' penetrating question by changing the subject? How many opportunities for a real encounter do we lose by cracking a joke, or keeping things only on the surface, or switching to a safe topic? Are they opening themselves up a little, asking to go to Jesus' dwelling place for quality time? The important thing for us is that the discipleship moves slowly. Now, we can move so slowly that we never get around to it, but John gives an okay to developing the relationship with Jesus slowly. If we keep reading in John, we discover that the disciples did not come fully to believe in Jesus until they had seen the water turned to wine at the wedding in Cana. Coming to believe can be a process.

Like the other gospels, John singles out Simon. In John, Simon's brother, Andrew, brings him to Jesus. We do not often meet someone who immediately changes our name, but that's what Jesus did with Simon. Jesus nicknames Simon, Cephas, Aramaic for the "Rock." The Aramaic comes out in Greek as Petros, and in English as Peter. In whatever language you say it, Jesus' words sound strange. What does Jesus see in Simon that deserves this nickname, the Rock? Simon does not always act like the Rock. The Rock denied being a disciple of Jesus when the going got tough. Jesus looked at Simon and saw the Rock. "What are you looking for?" Jesus asked. Whatever Simon was looking for when his brother told him they had found the Messiah, what Simon found was himself. He found himself as Jesus saw him.

John wanted us to know who the Baptist was, who Jesus was, and who the disciples, especially Simon, were. We might have come here looking for who we are. Simon found himself by trying to find the Messiah. What Jesus says to Simon is good for us to hear. We often hear in church not to be too full of pride, not to think too much of ourselves. We need to hear that from time to time. Jesus saw more in Simon than Simon saw in himself. We need to hear that, too. Do we see ourselves as spiritually weak? Have we let the putdowns of others sink in? Maybe the risen Christ sees in us abilities, strength, potential that no one else, including ourselves, can see. Maybe the risen Christ sees our inner Rock. Amen.