

There are two things which especially caught my attention while studying the reading from the Gospel. When I was reading the first part of the lesson I realized, for the first time that, apparently, John the Baptist was *talking to himself*. :) And the other thing I noticed is that *twice*, John repeats this phrase: “*I myself did not know him...*” So I want to talk about these two things and you can see where these may take *you*.

When I was reading the first part of the lesson I was wondering: *Wait a minute...who is John talking to?* In the last part he was talking to his *disciples* but in the first part he wasn’t. Now, there is no doubt that the Gospel book is quoting John in such a manner that he is effectively speaking to *us*. But, strictly speaking, within the context of the narrative, John is apparently talking to *himself*. Which is curious because I cannot immediately think of another time in scripture where this happens. And it makes it possible, in yet another way, that we may recognize ourselves in the scriptures. Because, I don’t know about you—I do talk to myself a lot. I try not to do it out loud, of course. :) *Talking to myself* is one way that I figure things out, in addition to, of course, talking to others, and reading, and researching things.

And that seems to be what John the Baptist is doing here: *He is talking to himself*. But the difference here is that he isn’t talking to himself to try to figure something out, but to *confirm to himself, to remind himself*, of something he has finally come to know. In fact, what he finally had come to know was something he had *not* figured out himself. And he is repeating it to himself because he needed *to hear himself say what was in fact true*.

There is a curious refrain here which he repeats twice as he talks to himself: “*I myself did not know him*”. The truth which John had discovered is about Jesus. And he is reminding himself of something that he needed to remember about his experience of Jesus. And that is that, for some time apparently, John did *not* know Jesus—he could not recognize Jesus as the Christ. Which is remarkable given that John’s whole vocation from God was to prepare the way *for the Christ*. But when Jesus appeared, John didn’t immediately notice him, didn’t recognize anything special about Jesus, and was looking in other directions for the help of the world. In John’s self-talk today, he reminded himself of his own limits: “*I myself did not know him*”. And the point wasn’t to berate himself. *But to point to a crucial reality that he had discovered and which bears our attention too*. The only way that John the Baptist recognized Jesus was not because of his own religious smarts--*but because of the revelation of God*.

The idea of *revelation* means that *there are indeed things—very important things—that we just cannot know on our own, by our own wits*. All kinds of creatives know something like this—artists, writers, philosophers, scientists—but even they, in all the intensity of their work may forget how their muse comes from beyond, how crucial and unimagined turns of thought can suddenly drop into your mind unanticipated. This experience of creatives is parallel to the experience of *revelation from God* which the scripture testifies to. But it may still be hard to accept. Being “modern” people, we seem to live in a cultural story about ourselves where we aren’t supposed to have any limits that we can’t buck up and transcend by the sheer force of our intelligence and will power. We are supposed to figure everything out and fix ourselves. We are supposed to help ourselves, always. There are whole bookcases of books about just that in bookstores—we are supposed to fix our money worries, our relationships, our loves, our families, our vocational lives, our health, our spiritual well-being, our happiness—you name it. Limits are only there to be transcended—or otherwise we might be dreaded *losers*.

But such self-talk is utterly alien to the world of the Bible. *The idea that we can figure out everything...and continuously just fix ourselves...is absurd from the perspective of God. There are great truths that we can only know by God revealing them to us:* The truth of Jesus. The truth of the Holy Spirit. The truth of goodness. The truth of sin and evil. The truth of our lives as we have actually lived them. *There are things we can only know because God shows them to us*.

*The most important things ever are actually outside of our grasp*. We can prepare ourselves, talk to ourselves, and figure out things as best we can—and we should. *But then, as John had discovered, we really do need the revelation of God*.