

## First Reading: Isaiah 35:1–10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus <sup>2</sup>it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the LORD,  
the majesty of our God.

<sup>3</sup>Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.

<sup>4</sup>Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
"Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you."

<sup>5</sup>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

<sup>6</sup>then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;

<sup>7</sup>the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

<sup>8</sup>A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

<sup>9</sup>No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.

<sup>10</sup>And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

## Psalm (ELW): Psalm 146:5–10

<sup>5</sup>Happy are they who have the God of Jacob <sup>1</sup> for their help,  
whose hope is in the <sup>1</sup> LORD their God;  
<sup>6</sup>**who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that <sup>1</sup> is in them;**  
**who keeps promis- <sup>1</sup> es forever;**  
<sup>7</sup>who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to <sup>1</sup> those who hunger.  
The LORD sets the <sup>1</sup> captive free.  
<sup>8</sup>**The LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD lifts up those who <sup>1</sup> are bowed down;**  
**the LORD <sup>1</sup> loves the righteous. R**  
<sup>9</sup>The LORD cares <sup>1</sup> for the stranger;  
the LORD sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way <sup>1</sup> of the wicked.  
<sup>10</sup>**The LORD shall <sup>1</sup> reign forever,**  
**your God, O Zion, throughout all generations. <sup>1</sup> Hallelujah! R**

## Second Reading: James 5:7–10

<sup>7</sup>Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup>You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. <sup>9</sup>Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! <sup>10</sup>As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

## Gospel: Matthew 11:2–11

<sup>2</sup>When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup>and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup>the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>6</sup>And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."  
<sup>7</sup>As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup>What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup>What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup>This is the one about whom it is written,  
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.'  
<sup>11</sup>Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

## What's In A Name?

In the movie *Unbreakable*, Samuel Jackson plays Elijah Price, a man born with a rare disease in which bones break easily. A big comic book fan, he theorizes that if he is so breakable just maybe there is someone equally unbreakable.

Bruce Willis plays David Dunn, a security guard searching for meaning in his life, wondering who he is and feeling a profound sadness over how things went so wrong from what he had hoped.

On his way home from a job interview, David is the sole survivor of a horrific train wreck that kills all the other passengers. He is unscratched. He is contacted by Elijah, who proposes to a disbelieving David that he is a real instance of the kind of person after whom comic-book superheroes are modeled.

In the course of the movie, David discovers that Elijah is right. What's important to today's readings is the dialogue between them at the end. David goes to see Elijah at his art studio for a showing of some of Elijah's drawings.

Elijah asks David: "When you woke up this morning, was it still there, the sadness?" "No," David replies, because now he's discovered his gifts and purpose. One of David's newly discovered powers is to see a person's personal history through touch.

Elijah tells him that he thinks it's time they actually shook hands; he had always worn gloves before. They shake hands and David sees Elijah bombing a plane, setting fire to an occupied hotel and burning it to the ground, and causing the very train accident David survived.

David recoils in horror, realizing that in Elijah's quest to find his unbreakable counterpart he had caused disasters that killed hundreds if not thousands of people. Elijah, knowing David's powers, says: "You know what the scariest thing is? To not know your place in the world. To not know why you're here. That's just an awful feeling."

David replies in shock: "What have you done?"

Elijah tells him: "I almost gave up hope. There were so many times I almost gave up hope, but I found you...Now that we know who you are, I know who I am. "

Both Elijah and David are in the midst of an identity crisis throughout this movie. Neither is sure who he is or what his purpose in life is. Though Elijah turns out to be evil, his crisis of identity is ultimately resolved only through a relationship.

Now, John the Baptist is anything but evil, but I think one faithful reading of today's Gospel is that he is having a bit of a typical human identity crisis.

Not that at 45 with the kids almost grown and gone, I'd know anything about that. My interest is purely academic, of course.

John is in prison probably wondering if he'll live much longer. His life's work has gradually faded. There's no indication he ever married or had children. Wearing camel hair shirts and eating locusts couldn't have been that fun, especially when he was denied wine and strong drink before he was even born.

At first glance this story looks like it might be one of those moments like the disciple had, and we have all too often: a moment of weak faith, but I don't really think so for two reasons.

First, Jesus, doesn't chastise John like he does so many others, like on the road to Emmaus when he said: "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all the prophets have spoken." Or like on the boat in the storm: "Why are you so afraid? Have you no faith?" Or like the time the disciples came to him because they could not cast out a demon, and they asked Jesus why and He said "Because you have so little faith." Or like the time Peter sank when he was trying to walk on water and Jesus said "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

The second reason I don't think it's really a story of wavering faith is that John was as about as old school as they came. The disciples were with Jesus all the time. They saw His character up close and personal day in and day out. They witnessed His miracles first hand. They ate meals with the very Son of God, slept where He slept, prayed with Him, worshipped with Him, listened to his teachings and hung on His every word.

John didn't have that. In fact, his public ministry even started before Jesus's. He had prepared his entire life with no support group of any sort, the structures and powers were against him, he lived alone in the wilderness. And despite all that he had the faith to publicly declare of a lowly carpenter's son in nowhere'sville Bethany "Behold, the Lamb of God"!

Rather than rebuke John, Jesus praised him, and seems to rebuke the crowd. He told them: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup>What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup>What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet...Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist."

No, John wasn't a "reed shaken by the wind." Like the rest of us, he just needed some reassurance. He was probably asking himself: "Did I fulfill my mission? I had an important job to do. Did I get it right? Am I really who I thought I was?" He's questioning his identity.

Jesus affirms John's identity by affirming His own. Jesus affirms His own identity with Scripture, and He does so in a way which would have had a powerful impact on John.

The two Old Testament books most important to establishing the future ministry of John the Baptist are Malachi and Isaiah. Jesus uses them both. Malachi He quotes, and Isaiah he alludes to. The Old Testament quote in this morning's Gospel text is from Malachi 3. Jesus said of John: "This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'"

The very first verse of the oldest Gospel, Mark, begins with an affirmation of Jesus's identity and then uses both Malachi and Isaiah to affirm John's:

<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophets,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way; (Malachi)

<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.'" (Isaiah)

Our first experience with John in Luke is the angel, Gabriel, telling John's father, the priest Zachariah, about his coming son. Part of Gabriel's message is the very last words of the Old Testament in Malachi 4, perfectly connecting the end of the Old Testament to the beginning of the new. John's father would have told him this story.

Matthew introduces John with the same quote from Isaiah Mark used. John, the Apostle, records John the Baptist using this same quote from Isaiah to explain who he is. When the priests and Levites from Jerusalem came and demand to know John's identity. John denies he is the Messiah and they get more insistent:

"Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" <sup>23</sup>He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"

as the prophet Isaiah said."

At that point, John knows perfectly well exactly who he is and, more importantly who he is not, and the books of Isaiah and Malachi would have had a special significance for him in establishing that identity. Jesus simply reminded him of this by pointing him back to Isaiah, this time to a prophecy about Himself, the Messiah.

Jesus tells John's disciples to: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup>the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Many of the miracles Jesus described here were foretold in our Old Testament lesson this morning. John would have known the book of Isaiah cold; he would immediately have seen the connection between what Jesus was doing and what Isaiah said the Messiah would be doing.

If we look again at Isaiah 35 we see this:

<sup>5</sup>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
<sup>6</sup>then the lame shall leap like a deer,

The other miracles Jesus talks about, lepers being cured, the dead rising, and the good news preached to the poor, all also come from other parts of Isaiah, and John would have known them all. John had all the answer he needed. By establishing His own identity from Scripture as the long promised Messiah, Jesus affirmed John's identity as the one who prepared the way.

We are defined in relationship with Christ, through His Spirit and His Word. If we ever doubt who we are, all we need to do is affirm who Jesus is.

But all too often, we create our own false identities instead. Peter is an excellent example, and perhaps his example can help us. Peter had received his identity directly from Christ. When Jesus asked His disciples "Who do you say that I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Like Elijah in the movie, who couldn't know who he was until he knew who David was, before we can know who we are we must first know who Jesus is.

Peter demonstrated that he knew, and so "Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

Jesus calls Simon by his full name—"son of" was the closest they had to a last name, and then He gives Him a new name and identifies his mission, which was associated closely with that new name. In our Gospel, Jesus also identifies John by name and mission. "John the Baptist, a prophet, yes, and I tell you, more than a prophet."

Naming is important. One of the primary ways of dehumanizing a person is to take away his or her name. During the Holocaust Jews were stripped of their names. And one of the first things many slaves did when they finally obtained their freedom was to take a new name.

Many Christians used to wait until their children were baptized to christen them. The very fact that we use a derivative of the name of Christ to describe naming and dedicating a child shows how important this is. When we are adopted into God's family, through Christ in baptism, we all receive a new name: Child of God.

Yet, when Jesus was arrested, Peter let his fear rather than his faith define him; he took his eyes off of Jesus and looked to the crowd and the authorities to give him his identity. He was anything but a rock.

After His resurrection, though, Jesus restored him on the beach. We all know that story well and read it each Easter season. Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him, but listen to how each question starts. I'm only going to read the questions:

“When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John do you love me more than these?’

<sup>16</sup> Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’

<sup>17</sup> The third time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’

In his restoration of Peter, each and every time Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, he first called him and identified him by his full name. I digress for a moment, but don't let the “son of Jonah” in Matthew and the “son of John” in John confuse you. Matthew was written primarily for Jews and John for gentiles, and there were many transliterations and translations of such common names.

What's absolutely crucial, though, is to know the identity of our Lord, to know His name—Christ, the Son of the Living God—because we are all worshipers. The opposite of Christianity is not atheism but idolatry because everybody worships something or someone. Sometimes our idols are our false identities. Like we often do, Peter had created a false identity, and he had to have it taken from him.

What did Jesus mean when He asked Peter if He loved Him “more than these”? More than these others love me? More than you love them? Or, since Peter was again fishing, does it mean more than your work, more than your false identity as a mere fisherman?



Perhaps Jesus is saying to him “I told you that you would be a fisher of men, so what are you doing back here with these nets and boats when I have sheep to feed?” Or is it broader, more than you love anything else? With which false identities are we replacing our primary identity as child of God, disciple of Jesus?

Our identity in all our relationships—family, work, community, society, and church—should always begin with our identity in Christ. Instead we often start backwards by looking to others to define us. Jesus affirmed His and John’s identity with Scripture. We, too, find who Christ is in the Scriptures, and so we also find there who we are: children of the living God, called, sanctified, set apart, sojourners, how this isn’t our home and how we have a mission and a purpose to love God and neighbor, to minister to one another and to the world.

At the end of *Unbreakable*, Elijah tells David that the arch-villain in comic books is the exact opposite of the superhero. For the Christian, that is the things of this world. We are commanded to “no longer be conformed to the patterns of this world.”

The world is always tempting us to get our identity from something or someone other than God. Maybe in this season more than any other, it is telling us to consume rather than to contemplate, to rush rather than to rest, calling us to parties rather than to prayer, to work rather than to worship, tempting us into debt rather than exhorting us into discipleship, beckoning us to malls rather than to the manger.

The way the Secret Service learns to identify counterfeit money is by studying the real thing so well they know what is fake. If we want to recognize our true identity, we need to study Jesus, not the counterfeit idols offered by the world. Like John we need to get our identity from Jesus for it is only Jesus Christ who gives us our real and lasting identity; it is He who knows us by name, who calls us by name, He, who in fact, names us.

What’s in a name? Everything. Absolutely everything when that name is Jesus Christ, the name given at which every knee should bow and every tongue confess that He, and He alone, is Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.