

Who do you think you are?

By [Christian Coon](#)

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My wife and I recently went to see William Inge's play [Picnic](#), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1953. It was a riveting performance. I was moved by how deeply the characters struggle to figure out who they are in their corner of the world, a small town in Kansas.

A young beauty queen grows weary of being pretty, while her younger and smarter sister yearns to leave her sister's shadow. A mysterious and handsome stranger comes to town oozing rebellion while looking for a new start, and a single schoolteacher begs a local businessman to marry her so she can move on from her empty life. All of these characters constantly measure themselves against the expectations of their neighbors, their community and themselves.

We are eager these days for ways to measure who we are and how we might fit with other, "better" vocations and relationships. We pull up a personality test, fill in the circles or click on the boxes and *poof*—we have answers. I have nothing against these tests; I've taken a few myself and found them helpful. But sometimes they cloud my self-perception—which is one reason that I'm drawn to this man sent from God in this week's gospel.

The authorities ask John a question: Who are you? It's not a new question. A bewildered Isaac asks this of Esau. Boaz inquires it of Ruth. Saul cries it out when the Lord comes to him on the road to Damascus.

John knows the answer, simply and deeply. He first knows who he isn't: the Messiah, Elijah, the prophet. Instead he is the voice, the witness. He is the one who will testify to the light, and nothing will deter him from this mission.

During Advent, I struggle to keep track of who I am. I get waylaid by secular shininess and burdened by my own expectations. It's a saving grace to read about a man who probably didn't spend hours figuring out his mission, vision, core values or

purpose. Or maybe he did—but whatever he discovered in the desert, he knew it to his core and wasn't afraid to express it.

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Now here's a list that we all need to read (and check twice). Paul's series of exhortations in 1 Thessalonians is a powerful reminder that those who wait need not do so with heavy hearts or by engaging in idle busywork. Carl Holladay [offers](#) this commentary:

The church's role, even as it faces the 'not yet,' is one of confident hope balanced with vigilance in prayer and thanksgiving, as well as the exercise of an active role in discharging its prophetic ministry. Taken seriously, Paul's advice here keeps us from adopting an attitude of discouragement as the church faces the realities of life and the world, even as it looks to Christ's coming.