

Tell us about yourself, John (Luke 3:7-18)

## **It's a great question to ask people. But not this person.**

by [Austin Shelley](#)

December 14, 2018

*To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).*

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

“Tell me about yourself” is the only conversation starter anyone needs, [according to Terry Gross](#), host and co-executive producer of NPR’s *Fresh Air*. Those of us who spend a significant amount of time probing the pages from Genesis to Revelation should listen to her advice.

If we imagine how characters of the Bible might respond to Gross’s open-ended invitation to self-disclosure, we may discover something newly interesting or worthwhile about the Bible stories we thought we knew.

*So, Abraham, tell me about yourself.*

Perhaps Abraham would reminisce about the night God shifted his gaze from his childlessness to the stars—too numerous to count, every glowing speck a sign of God’s promise to give Abraham descendants. Or perhaps he would choose instead to tell us about his most terrifying moment—the near sacrifice of his son Isaac, the one through whom Abraham believed God’s promise to have been fulfilled.

*Tell me about yourself, Moses.*

I wonder if Moses would begin from the beginning? Would he tell the story of his infancy, how he floated hidden among the reeds of the river bank? Would he consider his adoption and cross-cultural upbringing in Egypt to be foundational?

Would he choose to focus on the pivotal moment of turning aside to see the burning bush? Would he tell the whole story of confronting Pharaoh and leading God's people out of slavery into freedom? Or would he hone in on the emotions that welled up during his glimpse of the promised land he would never enter?

*Tell us about yourselves, Ruth and Canaanite Woman.*

This kind of imagination is not reserved for the Bible's patriarchs. If we were somehow able to extend this invitation to Ruth, might she tell us what prompted her to take the unexpected return trip to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi? And if we were to imagine a conversation with the Canaanite woman of Matthew 15, would she divulge the source of her courage in going toe-to-toe with Jesus after he insulted her?

A healthy imagination can lead us to ask deep questions of the Bible. In my tradition, ordained clergy and ordained lay leaders alike vow to serve God with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Nurturing a holy imagination, then, is an integral part of our call, and it is helpful not only in sparking wonder about ancient texts but also in leading us more fully to consider the myriad ways God is present and at work in the world.

But what if a biblical figure resists our invitation to tell us about himself? What happens when a character in the story evades our questions, no matter how persistent we are in asking?

In the third chapter of Luke, we encounter John the Baptist. Though other Gospel accounts give us a handful of colorful details regarding John's dress and diet (namely the camel-hair clothing and locust-and-wild-honey fare of Mark 1:6 and Matthew 3:4), the Lukan narrative focuses solely on John's ministry—a ministry through which John flatly refuses to tell anyone about *himself*.

*Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.*

Luke's quotation of Isaiah aligns John with the Israelites' long hope for a return from exile. Whether John actually says these words is beside the point; his ministry embodies this mandate as he prepares the way for Jesus. By calling for repentance and by baptizing even the tax collectors and soldiers sent to do Rome's dirty work, John points to the dawning of a new day. When the crowds question whether John

might be the Messiah, he answers by turning the spotlight off of himself and onto the one who is to come—to the one who will baptize not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Here we are, deep into Advent. As we await the birth of Christ, may our holy imaginations engage the wonder, the mystery, and the tension of this season. And may we, like John the Baptist, point not to ourselves but to the one who is to come—to the one who, as the epistle to the Ephesians describes, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.

*- Austin Crenshaw Shelley*