

Sounds of the Christmas season you're bound to hear in stores and restaurants this week include, "That's not my department," "You're not my table," and "We don't carry that product." These holiday sounds of irritation, overwork, and stress, imitate John the Baptist who says, "I am not the Messiah. I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet. That's not my department." After shopping if you learn more about what's not out there than what is, you've met the original Christmas spirit.

First, some background on these titles. "Messiah" means "anointed." The Book of Daniel says that God will send an anointed prince to Jerusalem in the last days. Elijah, in the second book of Kings, is taken to heaven in a fiery chariot. Malachi and Sirach speculated that Elijah would return, would swing low in his sweet chariot, to proclaim the coming day of the Lord. The prophet was foretold in the book of Deuteronomy. Israel had been awaiting these great figures who would signal God's power and presence among the people. When John arrived looking and talking like one of the prophets of old, they pounced on him with fierce hope that this was the Messiah, that this was Elijah, or that this was the promised prophet. John responds, "That's not my department." But, like a great sales clerk, he tells you where to find the product. He points toward Christ.

Until we know who John is not we don't really know who he is. John is not Christ; he is the pointer of Christ. His birth, preaching, and death foreshadow what will happen to Jesus.

John also foreshadows Jesus in this way: Until we know who he is not, we don't know who he is. Time and again we think we know who God is, only to be fooled. We think God will give us health, and then we get sick. We think God will provide for the family, and then we lose a job. We think God will grant a long marriage, and then your spouse divorces. We think God will protect our children, and then a child dies. When we think we know who God is, God says, "That's not my department." Some will conclude, "There is no God," but the faithful say, "God must be different from what I thought." St. Augustine says, "If you've understood it, it's not God." We address God with not-titles: God is im-mortal, in-visible, time-less, un-created.

When John the Baptist said "I'm not who you think I am," people became as frustrated as a wornout holiday shopper, but they were also closer to the truth. When we discover that God isn't who we thought, we're actually closer to the truth. That truth is the mystery of Christmas.