

Do you know how many hours a week we spend shopping? On the average. I saw this in the paper a while ago. We average six hours a week shopping. For some it's more, especially this time of year. For others it's less. It's hard to choose the right item. We want the best bargain, or the right gift for a very special person. Shopping is a skill and it raises expectations that we do it well.

Before Jesus made his public appearance, you might say that God had a shopping list to complete. At least, that's what people thought. They thought God had three items on the list, but God fooled them, there were four.

People thought the list included the following: the Messiah, Elijah, and the prophet. They expected a Messiah, an anointed king like David to rule them in a golden age; they expected Elijah, who drove a fiery chariot into heaven to return to earth someday; and they expected a great prophet, one who would announce the end. When that list was completed, people figured the kingdom of God would come.

So when John appeared baptizing in the desert, the Levites went out to him, carrying God's shopping list. "Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet?" "No," said John, "you're shopping for produce in a hardware store. Look for one among you whom you don't recognize now." Pocketing God's list, the Levites went for broke. "Then who are you?" John said, "There's a fourth item on God's list. I am a voice. I announce for you the Messiah, Elijah, the prophet."

If it were me in John's shoes, or sandals, if he wasn't barefoot, I'd have wanted to say, "You folks need a Messiah? Sure! What can I do to help? I'm a Christian, and Christ wants me to help people." But John said no. He was humble. He rejected the expectations of the Levites. John was not the Messiah, he was not the Word, he was a voice.

Do you ever find yourself raising expectations on other people? Wanting children to be the best, or a spouse or a close friend to behave consistently, or your superiors to be vigilant for your needs? Sometimes we are Levites expecting someone else to be the Messiah on God's shopping list. But we are not the Messiah, none of us is. What we are is the voice, all of us are.

When your heart aches because members of your family don't go to church, and you go to give an example that you belong to the community, you are a voice. When people at work cheat on their hours because everyone else does, and you remain faithful, you are a voice. When you are polite in rush hour traffic or with a sales clerk frazzled by Christmas, you are a voice. You won't be a Messiah, but you will be a voice.