May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Todays Gospel message is a way of trying to break down and move us beyond of our usual categories of how we see, relate to, and understand God, the world, each other, and ourselves. It is an attempt to see in a new way, a bigger way. It is an attempt to move deeper and to step outside the box into a larger understanding of God, the world, and life.

We all live with certain categories that make sense to us. We use them to construct our worldview and our understanding of God. We use them to try and make sense of people, circumstances, life, and relationships. Categories by their nature involve definition, limitations, and expectations. There’s nothing wrong with that until there is, until those categories begin to close us off, narrow our vision and our life.

We’ve probably all experienced times when we’ve thought or said something like “I can’t put my finger on it,” “I’m just not sure what to make of this,” “I can’t wrap my head around that,” “I can’t figure him out.” In those times our categories aren’t working. The person or situation doesn’t fit within our boxes and definitions.

John is one of those people. The wilderness is one of those situations. The Pharisees don’t get it. John and the wilderness don’t fit. They are outside the usual categories of the religious authorities of Jesus’ day.

When people, situations, or even God no longer fit the definitions and expectations of our categories maybe it’s time to look again, to open ourselves, and to consider that there might be something more.

Last week we heard about John who is portrayed as the witness and the wilderness revealed our un-self-sufficiency. This week John is portrayed primarily as testifier.

The priests and Levites come to the wilderness and to John with their categories, expectations, definitions, and limits. They expect John to fit. He doesn’t. He won’t allow that. “I am not the Messiah,” he tells them. They want to know then if he is Elijah. “I am not,” he says. “Are you the prophet?” “No.” With each negation John avoids one of their categories.

So, they want John to categorize himself. “Who are you? Let us have an answer,” they demand. “What do you say about yourself?” John refuses to let himself be boxed in or categorized. How could he? He is the witness and testifier to the light. He has to reflect in his testimony the reality and truth about the light… and the light of Christ is beyond all categories.

The priests and the Levites just don’t get it. They are hanging on to their categories, limitations, and expectations. “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” Their categories have kept them from seeing and knowing the one who already stands among them. Sometimes our categories do that to us. They keep us from recognizing the one who stands among us.

What categories do you live with? In what ways have you defined your life or the life of another? How have your expectations of when, where, and how Christ shows up, closed your eyes to his presence and his coming?

John has only one response to the priests, the Levites, and their categories. “*Make straight the way of the Lord*.” That’s also his response to our categories. Maybe John is telling us to open ourselves beyond all categories. Maybe John is saying that despite all the ways we try to categorize God, ourselves, and each other… the light is already among us. Maybe John is telling us let go of our categories and say yes to the one who is coming. Amen.