

What Kind of Messiah are You Anyway?

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet. Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

The scripture reading from Matthew this morning is appropriate for the third Sunday of Advent, as we wait for the birth of the Messiah, the Christ child.

For thousands of years, the Jewish people prayed and waited for a Messiah. What they wanted in a messiah was a deliverer that would conquer their enemies and establish a strong and righteous kingdom. They believed that their Messiah would be powerful, a warrior and a king, and through his power the Jews would again live in peace and prosperity. In Jesus' time they especially wanted a Messiah that would throw off the yoke of Roman domination.

John the Baptist, Saint John, had also been praying for and preparing for the Messiah. John had been doing this with a ministry of baptism and penance, and by criticizing the ruling religious establishment.

John knew Jesus. How do we know?

– The Gospel of Luke tells us that, even before John and Jesus were born, Mary visited Elizabeth, John's mother. "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child (John) leaped in her womb." Elizabeth exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:41-42).

-- In the third chapter of Matthew tells us that John preached, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (3:3).

-- Again in same chapter of Matthew, When Jesus presented himself to John for baptism, John protested, saying "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (3:14).

-- And finally in Matthew, after Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17).

So, John has reason to know that Jesus is the Messiah, and he *seems* to believe that it is true. So why does John question whether Jesus is the one who is to come? Maybe the reason behind John's question is found in his expectations for the Messiah.

In the third chapter of Matthew, John lays out his expectations. He called the people to repent (3:2), because "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (3:10). He warned that the one who was to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (3:12). John clearly wants and expects a fire-and-brimstone Messiah.

Jesus is not living up to John's expectations. Jesus has blessed on the poor in spirit, the meek, and the peacemakers (5:1-11). He has called his disciples to love their enemies (5:42-48). He has warned them not to judge others (7:1-5). These teachings seem rather weak in comparison to John's fire and brimstone preaching.

Jesus moved away from Jerusalem, the home of the temple and the center of Jewish religious authority, and began his ministry in Galilee (4:12). There Jesus began a healing ministry, important to those that He healed, but hardly significant to the Jewish nation as a whole.

It had been centuries since Israel has heard a prophetic voice (other than John's). People were looking for a voice of authority -- for a fire that would purge the dross -- for a powerful leader who would restore Israel's former glory -- for a Messiah who would restore the people of God. John keeps watching Jesus hoping to see fireworks, but so far has been disappointed.

That reminds me of a story. A woman was searching for the perfect birthday card for her husband. She came across a promising one. On the outside it read, "Sweetheart, you are the answer to my prayers." Inside, the card read, "You are not what I prayed for *exactly*, but apparently you *are* the answer."

I admire John for asking Jesus that question. It would have been easy for him to criticize Jesus -- to take potshots from afar -- to try to pressure Jesus to live up to what John expected. Some people think that Judas betrayed Jesus for just that reason -- to force Jesus' hand -- to get Jesus to live up to his potential. But John did none of that. He just asked a question: "Are you the one?"

Jesus sent John's messengers back with a message of his own. He reminded John of all the wonderful things that he had been doing -- bringing sight to the blind -- helping the lame to walk -- cleansing lepers -- unstopping the ears of the deaf -- even raising a little girl from the dead. But Jesus did more than to give John a list of his miracles. The message that he sent back to John was almost exactly the same as the passage from the prophet Isaiah that we heard this morning, telling John that Jesus had fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies. Jesus was doing his job -- everything was going according to plan -- so John could relax.

And then Jesus said this: "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (v. 6). At first, that seems like an odd statement. John hadn't taken offense at Jesus -- he had simply asked a question. Who could take offense at someone who was helping the blind to see and the lame to walk? Who could take offense at someone who raised a little girl from the dead?

But there were people who took offense. While Jesus was comforting the afflicted, he was also afflicting the comfortable. The poor and vulnerable were his friends, but not the rich and powerful. Almost always when Jesus came into contact with the rich and powerful, sparks flew. Jesus couldn't stand their prideful ways, and he usually sliced and diced them and left them on the cutting room floor. No wonder they took offense at him.

Matthew tells us about other people who took offense at Jesus. When Jesus went to the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida, they refused to listen to him (11:20-24). When he preached in his hometown synagogue, his sermon infuriated the congregation and they took offense at him (13:57). And, of course, it wouldn't be long before the religious leaders would kill him. Killing someone is the ultimate "taking offense."

You might think, "That was then, but this is now. Nobody would take offense at

Jesus today." But that isn't true. People take offense at Jesus all the time. Across the globe today, people are persecuting Jesus' followers. In Iraq, Christian Churches are being attacked, and many Iraqi Christians have fled the country. Likewise in Pakistan and Indonesia, Christians are being persecuted and killed for their beliefs.

And it is not just in a few isolated places somewhere else in the world that people are taking offense at Christ. Christmas has become increasingly secular in this nation as people take offense at any mention of Christ. Humorist Dave Barry, who lives in Miami, Florida, tells about Miami schools teaching kids to sing "Suzie Snowflake." Many Miami kids have never seen a snowflake. But in the public arena it is no longer permissible to sing "Joy to the World" and "Silent Night", so public officials have reinterpreted Christmas to mean Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Suzie Snowflake.

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School officials have become hypersensitive about any mention of Christianity. A Cupertino, California school principal recently took that to new heights, forbidding a history teacher, Steven Williams, to hand out any materials that refer to God -- including the Declaration of Independence and George Washington's Prayer Journal.

Williams -- the teacher -- says, "I've never even tried to hint that the kids need to believe this or that this is the right religion to believe. I'm just trying to teach history." He was applauded for lessons about Ramadan and Kwanza, but standards are different when the subject is Christian faith.

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And then there is Michael Moore's map of the United States and Canada where the west coast and the upper Midwest are joined with Canada, and the rest of the U.S. is labeled Jesusland -- Moore's way of mocking America and Jesus.

I am not here to bash Michael Moore, because Jesus loves Michael Moore every bit as much as Jesus loves you and I. And because sometimes, we are *all* tempted to take offense at Jesus:

-- We want him to make us rich, but he calls us to be poor in Spirit (Matt. 5:1).

-- We want him to understand human frailty, but he tells us that if we look at someone with lust, we have already committed adultery in our hearts (5:27-28).

-- We want him to protect us from injustice, but he says, "if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, then give them your cloak as well" (5:40).

-- We want him to take our side in a fight, but he calls us to love our enemies instead. (5:44).

Jesus is offensive because he asks us to live here and now as if we were living in the kingdom of heaven. He asks us to give up "this world" behavior to live by "that world" rules. He asks us to live as if this bad world were good. That's difficult. No wonder we are tempted to take offense.

But Jesus calls us to live as though we were living in the kingdom of heaven, because we *are*. He promises us that the kingdom has come near (4:17). He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven" (5:3) -- not "will be" but "is." For those who believe in Jesus -- who become poor of spirit for Jesus -- the kingdom of heaven is in the present tense -- it is NOW! That does not mean that there isn't something better waiting when we die, but it *does* mean that Christ sowed the seed of the kingdom two thousand years ago. He brought a bit of heaven to earth. Those of us who believe in Christ are standing with one foot in heaven.

Christians have been cultivating the kingdom for two thousand years. When John the Baptist expressed doubts, Jesus told John's disciples:

"Go and tell John what you hear and see:
the blind receive their sight,
the lame walk,
the lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear,
the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them." (11:5).

Those things are still happening today -- all over the world. Men and women who have become poor in spirit for Jesus are working all over the world today to bring healing -- and education -- and clean water -- and Christ -- to people who need it. Lovers of Christ have left comfortable homes and promising careers to serve the world's least in the name of Christ. And the world is far better for their sacrifices.

Jesus says, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." Blessed are we when we love the Lord. Blessed are our families. And blessed is our world. Amen.