

Sermon for Sunday December 17, 2023 Advent III

Every now and again, there's a problem. It's usually a big problem. It's a hard problem. And some good folks, wanting to be helpful, think that it is their personal job to solve the problem. You know how that goes. Their intentions are good, but they do not have the wherewithal to fix that big problem. And when that sort of thing happens, and the problem doesn't get solved, and the person is sitting in my office either in rage or in tears that the thing they did was not successful, I say a phrase that a few have you may have heard me say once or twice.

There is only one Messiah, and you are not Him.

It's not an unkind statement, it's simply a fact: this may be a problem that requires a whole bunch of people to fix, not just one hero or heroine, or – wait for it – maybe only Jesus can fix this one.

There is only one Messiah, and you are not Him.

When we hear the Gospel today, we hear John the Baptist trying desperately to respond to the queries of those who challenge his baptizing folks in the Jordan. The challengers have been sent from the Pharisees, to see who this strange fellow is.

“Who are you, the Messiah?” John says no.

“Well, are you Elijah?” John says no.

“Okay, then, are you one of the prophets?” John says no.

Cue the music symbolizing frustration.

They say “for the sake of all that is holy, tell us what you have to say about yourself!”

And then there’s probably a pause. Cue the waiting music (theme from Jeopardy.)

John’s thinking.

It’s too big for them to understand, no matter what words he uses.

But he tries. “I’m just doing what Isaiah said we were supposed to do, to make straight the way of the Lord.”

These challengers think to themselves, “well, at least he’s not just saying ‘no’ anymore.”

So they ask the follow-on question, the one they hoped he would answer without having to ask it so directly: “why are you baptizing if you aren’t the Messiah, or Elijah, or one of the prophets?”

That, he understands. “I baptize with water for repentance.” Rather like the ritual bath, the Mikvah, where observant Jews bath as an act of ritual cleanliness.

That, they understand.

But he keeps talking, and here’s where it gets a little crazy-making for them.

“Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

In other words: someone is coming presently who is the Messiah. There’s only one Messiah, and I’m not Him.

Did you know that my little phrase has such a long history?

But imagine turning all those NOs into who the Messiah really is?

I find myself thinking of an excerpt of a beautiful 17th century poem, “In the Holy Nativity of Our Lord,” by the British poet Richard Crashaw:

*Welcome, all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span;
Summer in winter; day in night;
Heaven in earth, and God in man.
Great little one, whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heav’n to earth.*

*To thee, meek Majesty! soft King
Of simple graces and sweet loves,
Each of us his lamb will bring,
Each his pair of silver doves;
Till burnt at last in fire of thy fair eyes,
Ourselves become our own best sacrifice.*

But perhaps such exquisite poetry would not resonate with the challengers, these suspicious souls. Perhaps it’s too stilted for 21st Century people like us. Perhaps instead we learn who the Messiah is from a song Mary sang when meeting her cousin Elizabeth when they were both pregnant with their sons. It’s not a song so much as a battle cry for all who hurt, for all who are downtrodden, for all who suffer. Who is the Messiah?

He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.

He has shown the strength of his arm,

he has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,

and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel,

for he has remembered his promise of mercy,

The promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children

for ever.

John the Baptist knows he is not the Messiah. We have no way of knowing whether or not his mother Elizabeth repeated Mary's pre-birth song to John. But John knows who the Messiah is: the one who will upend the old power structures, the one who will bring mercy and love, the one who is the promise God's people have prayed for.

For us, we who know that we are not the Messiah, there is good news here.

Our Messiah knows our strengths and our weaknesses. He knows we are capable of much more than our fears and biases. He knows we need help to do this transformative work. He is there to help us. He is there to comfort us when we need it, and he is there to challenge us when we need to be pushed a bit.

And so I offer once again our Collect for the day which you heard early in the service. Perhaps it will explain to you who this Messiah is, and what our joyful response should be:

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.