

WHAT SORT OF MESSIAH?; MATTHEW 11:2-11; ADVENT III; DECEMBER 15, 2019; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

What a marvel this children's Christmas pageant tradition is! Sarah Williams' thespian genius comes up with a new, relevant, uplifting theme on this old, old story every year. Back in the day, the emphasis was on set design, not theme, because there was only one theme: the nativity; but in fact, there are lots of plots and subplots in the story.

In the heyday of the 50s, the cast of the pageant was decked out in full regalia: angels in white diaphanous, full length gowns with golden wings; shepherds that could pass for Bedouin herdsman; and the holy family, young, determined, pious faces not too different from those original teenage parents in Bethlehem.

In recent years we have dialed back the formality of the costumes, just like our ushers no longer wear morning coats. But what our version of the Nativity takes away, it gives back in the message it delivers; like today's theme of welcoming the stranger. This generation of Christmas pageants is less window display than proclamation and has its own charm, just as the more literal pageants of Dr. Butzer's era had their unique appeal.

And while we are here to be charmed by our children and prepare our hearts for the birth of the baby Jesus, what this pageant and his birth ultimately announce is the dawning of a new era of God's history, of human history.

In other words, what our Sunday School children are telling us today is not the message of a sugar-coated Hallmark Christmas movie – nor is it the commercial catnip being passed out by purveyors of the retail industry to encourage sentimental indulgence and shopping frenzy – have you heard of Tiffany's \$117,000 jewel laden Advent calendar? Every day, every box has a gem.

What our kids proclaim to us today is that the birth of Jesus heralds a whole new beginning, a new way of seeing one another and our purpose here on earth.

The shift from the old way of being and seeing ourselves is subtle *because* it is announced by a birth and not a war or invention of technology like the wheel, printing press or computer. How could such an inauspicious beginning usher-in a new era of history?

And that's why I chose for our text this morning the Matthew story rather than the other choice: Mary's Magnificat, because Matthew speaks to our doubts.

Fast forward with me, Mary is no longer pregnant; Jesus is an adult and just begun his ministry. Matthew takes us into the weeds, the mud and debris of first century Palestine. John the Baptist that brave prophet is now imprisoned. Herod has locked him up for his denunciation of Herod's philandering with Herod's sister-in-law. John gets word in prison about the ministry of Jesus, the one for whom he was 'a voice crying in the wilderness.' In his prison cell, John begins to doubt that Jesus *is the one* who is to inaugurate a new epoch of time. So he sends word to his followers to ask Jesus, "Are you he who was to come, or are we to wait for another?" John thought the Messiah was the one to carry out the final judgement and burn every tree that did not bear fruit. Apparently, it is still not clear even with Jesus among the people that a new age has begun. John is uncertain Jesus is the Messiah because Jesus is not carrying out the scorched-earth policy (against Rome and the Sanhedrin) they were waiting for.

Doesn't that resonate with us this morning? Given today's world maybe we too wonder if Jesus is the Messiah we need or want. But John's question is an occasion for Jesus to clarify what kind of Messiah he is. Jesus acknowledges the some will struggle with the Messianic role he adopts; so he says to those who do not take offense at him: 'happy are those who do not stumble and fall because of me.'

This Messiah is devoted, as Isaiah said he would be, to the deaf, the blind, the imprisoned and to rescuing any marginalized and cast out by their physical, social and economic circumstances. Jesus' Messianic priorities were, therefore, a disappointment and threat to more than a few; and an obstacle that prevented many from accepting him.

Like John, they expected and wanted a 'law and order' Messiah, one who would stop the crime and punish the criminals. They preferred to wait for another Messiah in line with their expectations. Yet, Matthew's account is clear, Jesus alone will determine what kind of Messiah he will be.

Next, Matthew's focus shifts from what kind of Messiah Jesus is to John and what kind of prophet he was. Jesus praises John for preparing the way; he extols John's courage and integrity; indeed, John was a giant of a social justice figure; comparable to Martin Luther King, Jr., -- widely respected, gifted, a visionary and orator.

So what Jesus says next is startling. He says that anyone who enters the kingdom of heaven will be greater than John. We know the disciples aspired to fame and fortune; but it was a self-aggrandizing greatness they imagined and hoped for. Rather, the greatness of John was a surpassing greatness -- social justice conviction, moral/ethical clarity, unswerving integrity, fearless leadership.

How could ordinary fisherman and any who entered the kingdom of heaven Jesus came to inaugurate surpass John? Jesus was drawing a line in the sand, placing a comma between world history to that point and world history going forward; he was announcing the beginning of new era as the birthing suite of a new kind of person. What Thomas Merton called years ago 'the new man and the new woman.'

It is easy to fall into the trap of seeing history from the 20-20 perspective of hindsight: it all works out because we already know how it works out. What's the big deal? How foolish of anyone then not to be able to see in Jesus clear evidence that he was the Messiah and that a new era had begun.

Yet, I suggest we may suffer from the same doubt that plagued John. Regardless of which side of the political aisle we prefer, many of us wish we had a leader strong enough to unify the country and bring to justice the criminals who permit and encourage corruption as long as it benefits their political future or position of power; *meanwhile there are leaders and behind the scenes faithful* reaching out to and caring for the displaced and marginalized, the forlorn, the preyed upon, and those held back, held out, and held in jail or poverty or sickness.

Much to the chagrin of many, including some of us I suspect, Jesus the Messiah was not a political wrecking ball in his day or ours; he did announce judgement and condemnation for the self-absorbed; for example, those who lived like the rich man and were blind to the poor Lazarus's of the world. But that recompense would be determined by God's timetable. And the choice we are left with is to trust in the order and unfolding of God's grace on God's terms or not.

Here's the challenge: corruption abounds; political gridlock threatens; gun-violence and anti-Semitism erupted again last week; and there seems to be no room for children immigrants and homeless people in the richest nation on earth; I heard last week there are 60,000 homeless people in NYC, and as we know, 6,000 in WNY; and on and on the list goes.

Maybe the challenge is to believe in *any kind* of Messiah – just as the so-called nones that is, those who claim no religious affiliation and are the fastest growing group in the US give evidence to; let alone a Messiah who hangs out with gluttons and tax collectors rather than rids the world of nuclear-armed dictators or cleans house of politicians bought with dark money who permit the peddling of vaping to teenagers, carcinogenic pesticides for farming, the pricing of drugs beyond the reach of poor people and who lift environmental regulations.

Do we, do I recognize and accept the kind of Messiah who shuns the power to change all that – as he himself did in the wilderness with Satan – in order to hold the hand of a sick child, or standup for a mentally ill person rejected by his community, or who blesses a white supremacist whose heart has changed? It is my own need for retribution I have to let go of before I can call myself a follower of this kind of Messiah.

That was John's struggle from a prison cell; and it is our struggle in Advent – to let go of the longing for a Messiah who will fix the broken, polarized politics of our time and satisfy our hunger for partisan justice or who will fix whatever it is we deem in need of fixing. To let go of that kind of Messiah and follow one that welcomes strangers and lays his life down for others and trust that if we do all the things that perplex and worry us will find resolution in God's time.

That's the profound question our kids are inviting us to contemplate today: what sort of Messiah is it we are celebrating the birth of? What sort of people does he call us to be?

And if we really are listening – what sort of congregation does all this mean for us to become – not in some vague, distant future; but now, in 2020; how will we spend our time, talent and treasure individually and collectively? What great themes will the annual pageant of our ministry embrace in the coming year? For what kind of world? And most importantly, if we call ourselves Christian, for what kind of Messiah? Amen.