

Myers Park Presbyterian Church
December 21, 2014
Dr. Steven P. Eason

Messiah
Matthew 16:13-20

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During the year 2014, which is quickly coming to an end, the other clergy and I have been preaching on a word a week from the Scriptures. These words constitute a “*faith vocabulary*” which informs us on our journey of discipleship.

During Advent, the words have been titles ascribed to Jesus. We considered *Immanuel, Servant and Shepherd*. Today the word is *Messiah*.

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

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In Jesus’ day, the Jewish community was looking for a *messiah* (the anointed one) who was far different from what Jesus claimed to be.

They were looking for a *messiah* who would be;

- An anointed king or high priest.
- He would establish a world government in Israel.
- All Jewish people would be returned from exile to Israel, to their homeland.

- He would be a charismatic political and military leader who would attract people from all cultures and nations.
- There would be no more hunger or illness, poverty or war.
- He would rebuild Jerusalem, along with the temple and its service to the people.
- There would be global peace.
- He would be well versed in Jewish law.
- He would usher in the Messianic Age, the end of time.
- And in contrast to Christian thought, the *messiah* would be human, not divine in any way.

Jesus didn't measure up to any of that. He wasn't a political leader; he wasn't going to overthrow the Roman Empire. He didn't bring the exiles back to Israel or establish a world government. There was still hunger, war and disease. He was knowledgeable about the Jewish law but didn't always agree with it. He didn't rebuild Jerusalem or restore the temple.

- Now you can understand why when Jesus knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples they took notice of it! What kind of *Messiah* is this?
- Pilate asked him, "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" and he answered, "*My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.*" (John 18:33-36) So what kind of *Messiah* is that?
- Or what about when he went into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, riding on a donkey. The prophet Zechariah had prophesied, "*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*" (Zechariah 9:9) The *Messiah* rides a war horse, not a donkey!

This was to be a different kind of *messiah*!

In Jesus' day, the Jewish people saw history in two periods; the *present age* and the *age to come*. They had pretty much lost hope of God's rule in the present age. Rome was too powerful. Sin was too prevalent. There was war, violence, illness and death. Surely God could not fix all this without some cataclysmic supernatural intervention. The world needed to be totally rebooted! So, they looked for the *age to come*.

There are teachings of Jesus that apparently agree with that world view. In parables and other teachings he talks about a future time in which we would experience the complete rule of God, but he also teaches about a kingdom that is *here* and *now*. He talks like;

'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' (Mark 1:15)

He also said;

'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.' (Luke 17:20b-21)

So in a sense, the kingdom of God is already here – but not yet. Jesus is not a pessimist. He apparently did not think this present world was a total loss. God is at work in the world, here and now. He said things like this;

'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.' (Matt. 13:31-32)

So he's not talking about something that's going to come in smoke and thunder one day as much as he's talking about something that is organic, in the ground; often silent, sometimes even unseen. God is already at work in the world, even if we can't see it or don't know how.

There is no way Jesus of Nazareth could be the *Messiah*, not according to their traditional expectations. They either had it wrong or he did. It's one or the other. If he was the *Messiah*, God was doing something completely new and different.

- This is a *Messiah* who was born of peasant parents in the insignificant village of Nazareth.
- This is a *Messiah* who will break the sabbath law in order to heal a paralyzed man.
- This is a *Messiah* surrounded by a leadership team of uneducated fishermen from out in the country in Galilee.
- This is the *Messiah* who eats with sinners and forgives the sins of an adulteress woman.
- This is the *Messiah* who stops for children?
- This is the *Messiah* who challenges the giving of the rich at the temple but commends a poor widow for her giving.
- This is the *Messiah* who turns over the tables of the moneychangers and drives them out of the temple.
- This is the *Messiah* who teaches in parables and claims that the greatest commandment is to love God and to love neighbor as you love yourself.
- This is the *Messiah* who will suffer and die on a Roman cross of crucifixion because of his love for the world.

Jesus is a different kind of *Messiah!* He's not what they expected – or wanted.

I think his disciples were confused as to who he really was. They seemed all tangled up in the cultural expectations of who the *Messiah* was to be. The early church continued to wrestle with the person and nature of Christ. Was he human? Was he God? Those were no small debates. The world we live in today continues to be confused about who Jesus was, what he did, if he matters.

- Was he just another teacher or prophet?
- Does his death and resurrection really change anything?
- Is he too far back there and perhaps now irrelevant?

- Did people just have it wrong about him?

He once asked his disciples, “*Who do people say that I am?*” (Mark 8:27) The general public was confused. Some said he was John the Baptist, others said Elijah or one of the prophets. And then he asked them, “*But who do you say that I am?*” and Peter answered him, “*You are the Messiah.*” (Mark 8:29) It was then he invited them to follow him into a life of service and sacrifice.

‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?’ (Mark 8:34-36)

None of the ancient Jewish expectations have been met for the *Messiah*. Not yet. But who do you say that he is?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit.

Congregation: **Amen**