

ADVENT 3
DECEMBER 14, 2008
“I’M NO MESSIAH!”

Let us pray: Help us, with John the Baptizer, to get out of the way when we witness to you O God, pointing always to Jesus who alone is your Messiah and our Savior, in whose name I pray. Amen.

Last week we encountered John the Baptizer in St. Mark’s telling of the story as the very opening act of the “good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark then went on to quote from the prophet Isaiah of a God-sent “messenger” sent on ahead to prepare the way, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness (even as our Choir sang of it), ‘Prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight.’

Today we encounter John again only this time in the very first chapter of the Gospel according to St. John (two different ‘John’s of course), and in fact the words, to my ears,

interrupt or even **intrude upon** those soaring almost metaphysical musings that we call “The Prologue” to John’s Gospel—those words we’ll hear again as the concluding reading of our Christmas Eve Service of Lessons & Carols and that we’ll hear yet again as our Gospel reading on Christmas Day morning: the words that begin so sonorously “*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” and that end with John’s abbreviated Christmas story “*And the Word became flesh and lived among us....*”

The beginning of today’s Gospel reading effectively “interrupts” the prologue to John’s Gospel by intruding into the Gospel writer’s philosophical reflections the **mundane, prosaic historical** claim: “*There was a man sent from God whose name was John.*” This man, the Gospel writer explains, in order to justify the interruption, “*came as a **witness*** (the Greek word for witness is, remember, “martyr”) “*to **testify***

(or again “martyr”) *to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*”

It’s one of those passages I can’t help but think where the Gospel writer “doth protest too much.” And indeed many biblical scholars think that all four Gospels, each in its own way, reveals what must have been something of a rivalry—or at least some tension—between John’s baptism repentance movement out in the wilderness and Jesus’ preaching and healing movement which would occur in the cities and villages of well-settled Galilee and finally in Jerusalem itself. In fact it seems, according to near contemporary non-biblical accounts (like the Jewish historian Josephus) that John the Baptizer was more of a religious phenomenon in his day than Jesus—and even until today there is a small religious sect (I think it’s in Iraq) which claims John the Baptist as its founder. St. Luke even goes so

far in his Gospel as to make John a cousin of Jesus, son of Mary's older cousin Elizabeth - more of that next week. So you see the Gospels in different ways seem to go out of their way to patch up any differences there may have been between John's and Jesus' followers including, as in a verse preceding today's reading, having John explicitly again "testify" or "martyr" of Jesus: "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me **ranks ahead of me** because he was before me.'"

But to me the greater curiosity is that all four Gospels clearly testify at all to the significance of John the Baptizer in preceding and in some way preparing the way for Jesus' entry upon the scene of his public ministry—despite whatever tensions may have existed among their respective disciples, either in their lifetimes or later—for both John and Jesus shared the fate of being executed—John by Herod and Jesus by the Romans. (Later this summer

we'll hear the vivid and lurid story of John's execution as recounted in Mark's Gospel.) But why is John so important to telling the story of Jesus, and what is his significance to what Mark last week called "the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?"

I find the beginning of the answer to this question of John's significance in John's own answer in today's reading to the searching question put to him by the Jerusalem priests and Levites sent out from Jerusalem to interrogate him, "*Who are you?*" The Baptizer's answer is itself curious on account of the repetitiveness and insistence of its language. For the Baptizer, John the Gospel writer reports, "*confessed and did not deny it, but **confessed**, 'I am not the Messiah.'*" Got that? _"I am **not** the Messiah."

Now I know that most of you know this but many people out there—including many regular church-going Christians don't know or remember that "Messiah" was a very

special word for the Jewish people, the title of the long-promised “son of David” whom the prophets of old had foretold would one day appear to restore the Jews to their God-appointed place in the world—no longer in exile, no longer in diaspora, no longer a subject people to the Romans or any other empire—and for many the promise naturally had strongly political connotations—for the “son of David” was widely expected to be a conquering king, like David his ancestor. “Messiah” literally in Hebrew means “**oil head**,” one anointed with oil to assume the kingship of Israel, as Samuel had anointed David. Only remember from last summer how we encountered in a reading from the prophet Isaiah announced how God had already sent a Messiah—an anointed one to liberate his people from their exile in Babylon. Anyone remember who that earlier “messiah” had been? (Silence) Yes, that’s right, Cyrus the King of Persia—a pagan emperor as Messiah? As I said then it

would be like we Americans being told that God had anointed President Abadminejad of Iran to be our savior?

So of course, over time, including in English, the word “messiah” has come to mean any long-expected deliverer or savior or liberator of a certain group of people. And of course we’ve all become familiar with the term “Messiah-complex” haven’t we—of individuals throughout history who’ve had a strong, often delusional, sense not only of their own self-importance but a kind of God-determined sense of destiny—from those who claimed to be the Messiah in Jesus’ own day down to the likes of Adolph Hitler who certainly suffered from a Messiah complex as well as equally deluded political and religious leaders throughout history. And finally, please remember that the word “Christos”—Christ in English—is simply the Greek word for Messiah—the anointed one. Christ isn’t Jesus’ last name. It’s his title, meaning

Jesus the Oil-Head, Jesus the Messiah—whose anointing we’ll hear more about on “Baptism of our Lord Sunday,” when a certain dove descended upon him and a voice from above declared its delight in Jesus.

So now maybe we can understand a little more clearly John the Baptizer’s answer to the religious leaders’ question “Who are you?” as first consisting of the absolute insistence, “I am **not** the Messiah.” Having made that crystal clear the religious delegation from the capital city then probes further, “What then? Are you Elijah?” -- that is the 9th century prophet of old who it was commonly believed God would send before the time of judgment as a sign of the end time. John, in fact, in his crude dress of animal skins and diet of locusts as well as in his call for repentance gave good reason to think he might be Elijah returned. But his answer is unequivocal, “**I am not.**” “Are you the prophet?” they probe yet

further—another expected figure of the end-time. And John says “No.”

Even more frustrated they ask “*then who are you? Let’s have an answer for those back in Jerusalem. What do you say about yourself?*” And John answers simply but of course with resonances of the prophet Isaiah’s own words we heard in last week’s first reading, “*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’*” — as Isaiah himself said. And then he went on, “*I baptize with water. 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.*” This is John’s distinction, captured perfectly in religious art through the ages as in Matthias Grunewald’s famous Isenheim altar piece in which John the Baptizer is portrayed—*anachronistically*, of course—standing at the foot of the cross, his elongated, boney index finger pointing toward Jesus, the crucified one. John, in this

sense is the prophetic Word-bearer of God extraordinaire who simply and humbly points away from himself to God's revealing Word incarnate in the life of God's people. No, I'm nothing special in and of myself—neither Elijah returned nor the great prophet you're all looking for. And I'm certainly not the Messiah—God's anointed one—I'm not even worthy to tie his shoelaces—but I can point to the One who is and I'm satisfied to be called to witness, to testify, to martyr, to simply point to the one anointed by God as Messiah.

Oh, if the church through history, if its popes and priests, bishops and pastors, theologians and especially its televangelists, could only reflect the utter humility of John in its mission and disavow its “Messiah complex”—that somehow it is our calling as church to “save the world”—and instead settle in all humility for our crucial task like John of pointing to the One who alone is in

the salvation business—God’s Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

Now as Paul wrote the Christians in Thessalonika (using Eugene Peterson’s translation): “*May God godself, the God who makes you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul and body—and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If God said it, God’ll do it!*” Or as the NRSV puts it, “*The One who calls you is faithful and will do it.*”

And that’s all the good news we need to hear—that God is faithful to God’s Word and calls us to the humility of John the Baptist.

Amen.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.