

December 11, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Jesus is Coming as Messiah

“Repent,” John yelled. He was concerned about people. Anyone could die at any moment and if they were not in a right relationship with God, they would suffer eternally. In heartfelt sincerity, he pleaded with people to turn away from their sin and look to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John was so sincere that he even reached out to those who were mean and nasty, like King Herod. There are a number of King Herods mentioned in the Bible. The one who interacted with John was Herod Antipas who ruled over the small northern region of Galilee. Without a good reason, he divorced his wife and married his sister-in-law, who also divorced her husband for no good reason. John the Baptizer told King Herod Antipas that his sinful lifestyle was taking him in the wrong direction away from God. For his own good, John urged him to repent. Herod Antipas did not like being told that he was a sinner, so he had John arrested and thrown into prison.

He is not always the Messiah we want him to be

As John sat in prison, he heard that what Jesus was doing. He sent his disciples to Jesus to ask (:3), “**Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?**” “**The one who is to come,**” was a common Old Testament phrase referring to the promised Messiah. The word “Messiah” means, “the anointed one,” the one who has oil poured on him. (The Greek word is “Christ.”) When a king or priest or prophet began serving, oil was poured on his head. Oil was a symbol of being blessed. It was a way of showing that this person had the special job of serving God and the people as king, or priest, or prophet. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, God told his people that he was going to send a special Messiah who would be king AND priest AND prophet. He would save his people from sin and death. Of course, we know the Messiah as Jesus.

Unfortunately, though, many Jews were hoping for the Messiah to be a political and military hero. They were hoping for someone like King David or Solomon who would get rid of the Romans, turn the economy around and turn their country into a world super power. That’s really no surprise. Everyone would like to have a heaven on earth. No matter what country or culture or religion, people are constantly striving for this elusive thing called happiness that always seems to be just a half an inch away. Our country was even founded on the principle that God wants us to pursue happiness.

It’s not a surprise that so, so many people have taken the Bible and turned it into a self-help book on how to become healthy, wealthy and wise. A prime example of this is a book published in 1952 by Norman Vincent Peale called, “The Power of Positive Thinking.” It used Bible passages to help people improve their lives. It is one of the best-selling books of all time, spending 3 ½ years on the New York Times best-selling list, translated into 40 languages, with millions upon millions of copies sold. It is still being printed. I read it. It’s garbage. Some of the things Mr. Peale tells you to do is to recite out each day, “If God is for us, who can be against us? (Ro 8:31)” ten times each day. Also, recite, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:13).” He rips those passages out of context and turns the Bible into some sort of get rich quick Ponzi scheme. How sad that people wasted their hard-earned money for such a book. It’s even worse that those people think of the Bible as a self-help book instead of a book that tells them about Jesus as their Savior.

Recently, I having been checking some websites that are pretty popular. They are often quoted by some national news sources. I looked at <christianity.com>. That sounds pretty good. It has LOTS of devotions. I scanned several. Another popular site is <insight.org>, the “Bible-Teaching Ministry of Chuck Swindoll.” Again, I scanned several devotions. It’s like they purposefully swing and miss. Every devotion focuses on feeling happy about life on earth. If your boss gives you a bad review, think positive thoughts and you’ll eventually get a raise. Not one devotion told me that Jesus forgave my sins or that I could look forward to eternal life in heaven. We might as well click our heels together three times like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz or wish upon a star like Pinocchio.

You need to know about such false teaching that is rampant in our society and can easily influence us. It’s dangerous to your soul. A recent Barna survey found that 70% of Americans claim to be Christian. That sounds great. But further questions in the survey – such as, “Do you believe that the Holy Spirit is true God? Is Jesus true God in the flesh? Is there physical life after death? Etc. – found that only 7% of Americans have a true “Christian worldview.” Just like the Jews at the time of Jesus, most Americans just want a quick sugar high. I’ll confess that a quick sugar high does not sound so bad at times. Who doesn’t want to feel happy? It’s not wrong to be happy. The problem comes when the desire to be happy becomes more important to us than Jesus as our Savior.

The devil is very quick to suggest to us, and our sinful flesh is hard wired to crave, a Messiah who does not care about our sin. Instead of a pure and holy Messiah, we would be very glad to have a Messiah with rosy cheeks and a nose like a cherry who just winks at us when we sin and says, “Ho, ho, ho.

It's no big deal. You'll still get your presents." We would be very glad to have a Messiah who is totally OK if we only give him our attention for an hour on Sunday and for 10 seconds of unconscious prayer before each meal. We would be very glad to have a Messiah who does not ask us to make any sacrifices. Only come to church when it's convenient and you feel in the spirit. Only give an offering after you've bought all the Christmas presents you want. And when the pastor challenges you to go to Bible class just once for a special presentation, why bother? It's not like he can kick you out of the church or anything. We would very much like a Messiah who always gives us everything we want.

That's not reality, though, is it? It certainly was not John's reality as he sat in a stinking prison cell for trying to help someone. The devil is really nasty. Whenever things are not going well for us, whenever we are hurting – either physically or emotionally, whenever life is tough (which happens quite often), he plants bad thoughts in our minds. He suggests that you are suffering and struggling because you did something wrong so God must be punishing you. You end up tired, worn out, hurting. You start to doubt God's love. Pretty soon, you're feeling dark, discouraged, depressed. You want to say, "Move over, John. Let me sit down next to you." Jesus is not always the Messiah we want him to be.

He is always the Messiah we need him to be

Many people debate if John doubted that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Maybe he got so depressed that his faith was shaken. Maybe he focused on Jesus as a judge who would be like a lumberjack and cut down worthless trees and throw them into the fiery judgement and he got confused that Jesus was not destroying the evil unbelievers like Herod. Or, maybe John's disciples were the ones who doubted so he sent them to Jesus to hear the answer directly from him. I don't spend much time wondering about things like that. I think that John was a normal human being like you and me. I think he had good days when he was strong in the Lord and handled things well and he had bad days when he felt sad and discouraged, just like you and me. I do not think that John ever lost his faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah. After all, notice where he turned to when he wanted an answer. He turned to Jesus.

Jesus' reply to John might strike us as a bit odd. He did not say, "Of course I am the promised Messiah." Was John maybe a little disappointed that Jesus did not come to visit him, or organize an army to free him from prison, or give Herod Antipas a heart attack. Jesus simply told John's disciples (:4-5), **"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor."**

The answer that Jesus sent back to John referenced our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 35. Jesus was saying, "John, I am doing everything that the promised Messiah is supposed to do. Therefore, I am the promised Messiah. At this moment, I am not destroying the unbelievers who reject me. That will eventually happen, but not quite yet. First, I will show love to the world by saving the world." Each healing miracle that Jesus performed was also a hint of the perfection in heaven that he came to win for us and all people. With these miracles he is letting us know that there is a better place that is coming. He will make it happen. You can trust in him.

It must have been miserable for John, a powerful preacher, to be stuck in a prison cell with no one to preach to. If John did not say it out loud, he most likely prayed, "Jesus, where are you when I need you." It is easy for us to ask, "God where are you when I need you? Where are you when my children, my grandchildren, my friends, my loved ones are hurting and need help?" Maybe it's when you are treated unfairly, or when the money in your bank account is not enough to cover your bills, let alone buy Christmas presents, or when you or a loved one are sick, or when it's cancer, or a broken bone, or torn tendon, or a lousy job or no job. When you find yourself asking, "Where are you God?" stop for a second and ask yourself where God was when *God* needed God, when God was nailed to a tree, crying, bleeding, suffering, dying? God left him all alone. Completely forsaken and he just took it. Jesus did not call for 12 legions of angels to help him, or even one. He was imprisoned on a cross of lonely pain so that God could keep his promise for every person of all time, including you today. Salvation is already accomplished. Your sins have already been forgiven. Heaven has already been paid for. An eternity of joy and gladness is waiting for you. Jesus is always the Messiah we need him to be.

How much longer? One day ... at a time. That's why, in our second lesson this morning, St. James pointed to people like John and Job and others as examples of patience in the face of suffering. God did not forsake them and he will not forsake you either. The last part of Jesus' message to John was (:6), **"Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."** [The word "stumble" refers to losing your faith.]" John did not look or feel blessed sitting on death row in prison, but he was. Jesus explained that John was not a reed shaken by the wind. That is, he did not bend his teaching to match whatever people wanted to hear. He was faithful. John did not have fancy clothes or a fancy house like the great people of the world, but John was great in God's kingdom. His ministry was prophesied in the Old Testament. He was the only Old Testament prophet to see Jesus in the flesh. Those were impressive things on his resume. But, Jesus, explained, you can consider yourself even more privileged because you know about Jesus' full

ministry – how he lived and died and rose and ascended. You have eyewitness testimony that your salvation is complete. You are saved. Jesus is coming as your Messiah and you are blessed here and eternally. Hang on to that. Amen.