

Explaining “Messiah”

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Matthew 16:21-28

Simon Peter had spoken up, for himself and for the church of all ages. Jesus is the Messiah, he said, the Son of the living God – all that Israel had been waiting for, all that God had promised. Peter spoke boldly, but Jesus told Peter and the others to keep this to themselves – for now. Apparently there was more to being the Messiah, and to following him, than they had realized.

From then on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the religious scholars and be killed and on the third day be raised. Then Peter took him aside and began to speak disapprovingly to him. He said, “God forbid it, Lord! This will never happen to you!” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get back behind me, Satan! You’re a stone for me to trip over. You’re not thinking about what matters to God, but about what matters to people.”

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone wants to come behind me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. Because whoever who wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life because of me will find it. What good will it do a person, if she should gain the whole world, yet lose her life? Or what will a person give in exchange for her life? Because the Son of Man will surely come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will repay each person according to what he or she has done.

“I tell you the truth, there are some among those standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Children’s Story

Once there was a duck named Quincy Quacker. Like most ducks Quincy Quacker liked to fly and to swim. Unlike most ducks, Quincy Quacker had his own ideas about when and where and how to fly and to swim. That was Quincy; he had to do things his own way.

But then Quincy Quacker met the Swan. Nobody was like the Swan. He was beautiful – when he flew, when he swam, even when he walked.

More than anything, Quincy Quacker wanted to be like the Swan. “Mr. Swan,” Quincy asked, “how can I be like you?”

“Come with me,” answered the Swan, “And do the same things I do.”

So Quincy Quacker followed the Swan. He learned to fly and to swim a new way. It wasn’t his own way – not at first; but he made it his own. What Quincy learned following the Swan made a big difference in the way he lived. It also made a big difference in the way Quincy would die.

One day, while Quincy Quacker and the Swan were flying over the river, they saw two ducklings swimming down below them. The ducklings swam very fast for being so small. But they were swimming too close to the waterfall, and they were going to go over the edge.

The Swan turned to Quincy Quacker. “Follow me!” he said. Then he flew and swam to the rescue. The Swan pushed one of the ducklings out of the water. Now it was safe. But then the Swan himself went over the waterfall out of sight.

Quincy Quacker saw what happened. And he flew and he swam, and he rescued the other duckling just in time. But then Quincy Quacker went over the waterfall too.

He had become like the Swan.

Sermon

Last Friday my daughter sent me a YouTube link by email. It was for a clip from last Thursday's edition of *The Daily Show*. I clicked on the link to discover a Barack Obama parody:

*A nation and a world in chaos were waiting,
for a Savior,
for a Messiah –
waiting for 180 million years for . . . Barack!*

Flashes from *The Lion King* and from *Seinfeld* expressed longing and hope – both of which, come November, will be satisfied!

It was a joke. But messianism is no stranger to the American story. A larger-than-life Abraham Lincoln is entombed in Washington, D.C. The memorial inscription leaves no doubt. He was “the savior of the nation.” And that nation has often been accused of having a messiah complex. And not without reason. We see ourselves as a beacon of light and hope to the world. We imagine that, if we just keep true to our founding ideals, we will shower the world with blessing – with freedom, with prosperity, with peace. We know this is why people flocked to our shores. And we know this is why they still run toward our borders.

Let's imagine for a moment that this story is on target. That we are the messianic nation. That this is not a self-aggrandizing concept, but a God-given role. That we are destined somehow to bless and save the world. If we are to be the messianic nation, what might that look like – if we are true to that calling? What might a messianic nation look like?

Did you see or hear about the recent New Yorker cover? It pictured Michelle Obama as an AK-47-wielding black nationalist. And it pictured Barack Obama as a Muslim, complete with a portrait of Osama bin Ladin hanging on an Oval Office wall. There are those rumors, after all – unfounded internet rumors – that Barack Obama is a Muslim! Imagine Inauguration Day. President Obama takes the oath of office. Then he immediately tears up the Bible, wraps a keffiyeh around his head, and shouts, “Death to infidels!” That's the frightening prospect those internet rumors aim to conjure in people's imaginations.

But here's something even more frightening. Instead of President Obama, imagine President McCain with an Inauguration Day surprise of his own. He takes the oath of office. The he immediately holds up the Bible and says, “We are the messianic nation!” Then he makes a speech along these lines:

I am disbanding the armed forces. I am decommissioning every naval vessel. I am ordering missile silos to become grain silos, stealth bombers to be scrapped and converted to Zero Emission Vehicles, and cluster bombs to be neutralized and reconfigured as chandeliers. (**Available exclusively at Home Depot!**) We will no longer defend ourselves. If attacked, we will not fight back. We will suffer; we will endure; we will die. We will not retaliate. We will be scorned; we will be mocked; we will be a laughingstock. We will become the butt of bad jokes. We will be a bad joke. I am ordering all of this, however, and we will do all of this, because we are the messianic nation. And this is what messiahs do. Messiahs surrender; messiahs suffer; messiahs die.

That would be much more frightening than a Muslim Obama. Of course, a President McCain would never get away with that. There are too many checks and balances.

But forget about political realities. Wouldn't that kind of President McCain be right? Isn't suffering and dying what messiahs do? That certainly is what messiahs do, if Jesus defines the vocation. And the Christian tradition says that is exactly so. Jesus and Jesus alone defines what it means to be the Messiah. And as Jesus explains the messianic vocation, suffering and dying take center stage. And his explanation is more than words. Jesus especially explains “Messiah” by what he does – by journeying to Jerusalem and to his own cross.

Nonetheless, let us tend to Jesus' words. The first thing to notice is this: "he had to." He had to. He had to go to Jerusalem. He had to suffer many things. He had to be killed. He had to be raised. He had to. He had no choice in the matter – not if he was to be true to his calling.

We live in a culture that values personal choice. That's an understatement! From thirty-one flavors of ice cream to movies-on-demand, from worship styles to reproductive rights – we demand the right to choose. But Jesus the Messiah had no choice. There was only one way for him to be true to his calling: the way God had determined for him, the way through suffering and death. Jesus "chose" that way, fully aware of what was in store. It was the only way for him to be Messiah, the only way for him to save the lost world.

In her book Bird by Bird, Anne Lamott tells this story about giving:

An eight-year-old boy had a younger sister who was dying of leukemia, and he was told that without a blood transfusion she would die. His parents explained to him that his blood was probably compatible with hers, and if so, he could be the blood donor. They asked him if they could test his blood. He said sure. So they did and it was a good match. Then they asked if he would give his sister a pint of blood, that it could be her only chance of living. He said he would have to think about it overnight.

The next day he went to his parents and said he was willing to donate his blood. So they took him to the hospital where he was put on a gurney beside his six-year-old sister. Both of them were hooked up to IVs. A nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the boy, which was then put in the girl's IV. The boy lay on the gurney in silence while the blood dripped into this sister, until the doctor came over to see how he was doing. Then the boy opened his eyes and asked, "How soon until I start to die?"

That boy answered the true human calling: to love, to give, even to die. Of course, he had misread the situation, and he was spared. Jesus, on the other hand, read the situation accurately, and he was lost. That's what happens to the Messiah.

That's also what happens to those who follow the Messiah. Peter, of course, had another idea. He's the one who tagged Jesus as Messiah in the first place. And being Messiah, as far as he was concerned, was not about suffering and dying. "God forbid it, Lord! This will not happen to you!" But it would happen to Jesus. And Peter himself would face the same threat again and again. In Gethsemane. In the courtyard of the high priest. In Jerusalem. And ultimately and fatally, in Rome. This risk, this fate even, could not be avoided. There was a cross for those who would follow Jesus.

Jesus seems to offer a choice. "Deny yourself" – or not. "Take up your cross" – or not. But the only choice is "Follow me" – or not. With following, there comes a cross. And to follow Jesus, you have to take it up. When Jesus decided to go to Bethany in Judea to his friend Lazarus, who was dying, he was warned: "It's death for you to go back to Judea!" But Thomas said, "Let us go, too, and die with him." That's what a disciple does. There's really no choice.

But how do you "take up" a cross? I've often wondered about that. Do you go looking for a cross? I don't think so. Crosses are given; crosses are imposed; crosses confront the followers of Jesus. On the road behind Jesus, we run into crosses. Then we either turn back, turn aside, or pick up that cross and bear it behind Jesus, with his help.

But what is a cross? Is it a crossroads? Is there an easy way and a difficult way? A way of life and a way of death, with a cross being the choice of a difficult way that leads ultimately to life? Is a cross always a point of decision, critical life and death decision? Of is it a thousand points of decision, stretched across a lifetime? During the Middle Ages, there were apparently enough slivers of the "true cross," treasured as relics, to make many crosses. Are those thousand decisions, stretched across a lifetime, each a sliver we either take up or refuse? Do those slivers and decisions add up to our cross, to the burden we are called to bear behind Jesus? I wonder.

Peter tempted Jesus to abandon the difficult, painful, deadly way. Jesus, on the other hand, knows there is no other way. Not for him. Not for those who follow him. “Refuse your cross; refuse your burden; refuse your suffering; try to hang onto your life – you’ll gain nothing and lose everything,” says the Lord. Whatever a cross is, there is no choice about it. Not for those who follow Jesus the Messiah.

I’m still a beginner when it comes to following Jesus and bearing a cross. So I won’t suggest to you what your cross may be, what you are called to endure, not because life is hard, but because you are following Jesus. I will say this, however. Being Messiah seems to be much more about weakness than it is about strength. Being Messiah seems to be less about self-defense and self-preservation than it is about defeat and surrender. Certainly victory does come – on the third day – but not without complete defeat first, not without willing surrender.

Through the ages nations, armies, and armadas have claimed to be servants of Christ: crusading against Muslim infidels in holy lands, destroying Protestant heretics or pope-loving idolaters, or spreading justice and liberty at the end of a smart bomb – and ridding the world of evil! None of that sounds very Messiah-like to me. Not the way Jesus explained it. Not the way Jesus lived it. And certainly not the way Jesus died it.