

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Hebrews 5:1-10
Sermon Title: "Messiah, The Great and Powerful" (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA
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Back in 1741 a certain German composer was inspired to write a choral piece that told the story of Jesus in Scripture. He was so inspired that he wrote day and night for three to four weeks. It really should have taken him half a year or more. The orchestra and choir gathered on Easter Day 1742. The crowds swelled to over 700, which was too much for the opera house. Women were asked not to wear dresses with large hoops underneath, so there would be enough room for everybody.¹ Men and women were mesmerized by the way the Bible was sung to them. The music and voices floated over the audience like the choir of angels. When King George II of England heard the Hallelujah chorus, he stood in reverence.² When the king stands, nobody sits. Everybody else had to stand. And that is why we still stand, when the glorious sound comes forth from George Frederic Handel's Messiah.

¹ <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/The-Glorious-History-of-Handels-Messiah.html>.

² http://www.cbn.com/SpiritualLife/Devotions/Betzer_Messiah0312.aspx.

“The idea of the Messiah was deeply ingrained into Jewish thought... The origin of the idea of the Messiah is closely related to the idea of the covenant relationship with God and Israel.”³ The Jewish nation itself was selected by God. He heard the cries of Israel as they suffered oppression in Egypt, and God called them to escape that slavery in order to enter freedom and prosperity. In the process of that escape, the Lord taught Israel how to live. He said that they were not going to follow the old way as they did back in Egypt. They would learn new ways to exist, and by doing so God would bless them immensely. “I am your God, and you are my people” is the foundation of this covenant relationship. It is a relationship, because both side, God and Israel, chose to grow in love for each other, grow in understanding for one another, and thus their intimate connection should never diminish nor sever.

Of course, in all covenants there has to be a go-to person, a leader who reminds everyone of the covenant and makes sure it stays strong. This person would be an agent of God, a direct representative of God’s will and laws, and through this one person the destiny of the nation would be fulfilled in glory. This person would be known as the Messiah, which comes from

³ William Barclay, *Jesus As They Saw Him*, 95.

the Hebrew word *to anoint*. The Messiah is the Anointed One. Anointed with what? Oil would do nicely. Anointed for what? Well, let's talk about that...

Since Israel was in a strong covenant relationship with God, there had to be a leader to act on God's behalf to keep the covenant relationship in the forefront of everybody's minds. Somebody would have to be anointed as the leader, and the best likely candidate for the job could be the king of Israel. The king of Israel was anointed before taking office. Saul was the first king to be anointed, and then David was anointed after him, and so was Solomon.⁴ With all these kings being anointed, the idea arose that the Messiah wouldn't necessarily be one individual, but a series of individuals who would be king. The Messiah-process would occur along the succession of kings in the line of David.⁵ David was the first messiah figure, and then Solomon.

The idea of the Messiah was beginning to grow toward mythical proportions. It is thought that during the exile of Israel and Judah, the Messiah king who would rescue them would be some superhuman from

⁴ Cf. 1 Samuel 10:1, 16:13, and 1 Kings 1:39

⁵ Barclay, *Jesus As They Saw Him*, cf. 96.

God, who would crush foreign nations under the weight of his own feet. He would restore the chosen people of God to their land, and peace would reign forever. The Jewish people built upon this exaggerated legend, and they waited for him to arrive. They prayed and hoped for God to send his kingly Messiah at any time, but please may he arrive quickly.

But kings were not the only ones who were anointed to service. Prophets were also anointed with olive oil as God's agents to remind people of that constant covenant relationship.

One of the greatest prophets was Elijah. He was the prophet of Israel during the time of King Ahab, when the king's wife Jezebel was running wild, increasing the worship of the Canaanite god Baal. Jezebel had free reign to recruit more priests and prophets who would remind people that they ought to worship Baal and not the Lord God Almighty. During this time, Elijah comes forward, and he predicts a severe draught on the land for all the wickedness the people have performed.⁶ Elijah lives with a widow, and he raises her son from the dead, and they always have enough food. Elijah challenges the priests and prophets of Baal to see who the greatest God is. Who

⁶ Cf. 1 Kings 17:1-19:18.

can set an altar on fire, allowing lightning to come down from the heavens to ignite it? Elijah wins, and he orders the killing of all Baal priests and prophets. One of the last miracles that Elijah performs is ascending to heaven on a chariot of fire.⁷

If that isn't the stuff of legends, we don't know what is. No wonder the people would think that the Messiah would not only be a king but also a mighty prophet. He might even be Elijah himself, descending from heaven on a chariot of fire or on something else. He would come forward once more and right the wrongs, destroy the idols of the pagans, and allow for the one and only God to step forward and take his rightful place in our hearts.

Even as we speak about prophets who were anointed by oil to their services, we also must remember that priests were also anointed for their services. Prophets proclaimed God's word through warnings, and predicted events that would take place if the people would not repent. Priests actually provided for the worship of God. They didn't necessarily predict anything during their duties. Their main concern was to make sure the altar of the Lord was always lit, and that sacrifices of meat and grain

⁷ Cf. 2 Kings 2:1-18.

were always offered to God. They facilitated worship during special times of the year: The Feast of Unleavened Bread, The Passover, The Feast of Trumpets, The Feast of Booths. The priests provided the words and the ceremony, and gathered the people around to honor the Lord with their words and gifts and very lives.

So the Jewish idea of Messiah was a huge one. When we consider who could be anointed with olive oil – a king, a prophet, or a priest – we may understand how the image of the Messiah had grown toward mammoth proportions. A “divine, superhuman Messiah, who would break into history clad with the might of heaven, and who by superhuman means would do” what a normal person could never do.⁸ An unearthly Person, an otherworldly Figure, restoring land and government or worship all in one stroke of his mighty sword.

One night the angels overtake a group of shepherds. These shepherds were settling down for a long night of keeping their flocks of sheep safe. They weren't bothering anybody. They might have been having a meal and discussing “sheep things” between bites. Suddenly, they are overcome by a multitude of

⁸ Barclay, *Jesus As They Saw Him*, 107.

angels. The glory of the Lord shines around them, and they are terrified. These angels speak to the men, and they say, “We bring your good news of a great joy that just occurred today. For there in the city of David is born unto you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”⁹

The superhuman is here! That otherworldly Figure has finally arrived. Did you hear the angels? They talked about David. They talked about the Savior, and the Christ, who is the Messiah. They just said all the right words: king, prophet, priest. Nobody could be all three, unless he really is the Messiah.

But watch what happens next. Notice how the angels describe the Messiah. They don't say that he is a grown man in the city of David right now. They don't say he is waiting with a huge army for people to come and join the ranks. There is no mention of sword or violence or even political restoration. The angels say, “You will know this Messiah by this sign: You will find a Baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”¹⁰

What? He isn't even an adult. He's a baby. Were the kings ever helpless babies? Was Elijah ever a baby? When we think of the greatness of kings and prophets, and even priests, the last thing we think of

⁹ Luke 2:10-11.

¹⁰ Luke 2:12.

are tiny babies. The Messiah ought to be otherworldly not helpless. He must be a figure beyond our imagination, not a figure we can hold in our arms.

The people of Israel were at fault. They blew up this image of the Messiah to mammoth proportions, thinking they could create a savior to fit their dreams and wishes. They never considered how God would send his own Messiah. They never believed that God would do something totally different and yet well within what God wanted for his world.

It was the wise men who got it. Gentiles from a faraway land were the ones to understand who Christ was. Look at the presents they gave to the Christ Child. One of the gifts was gold, possibly presented in a small chest. Gold is the prize of kings. Jesus is from the lineage of King David, so it would seem he should rightly receive gold as a birthday present.

But in Christ the Messiah-process would not occur along the succession of kings in the line of David. The Messiah would be found in only one Figure, Jesus himself. He is the King of kings. He is the King of the universe, taking the government upon his shoulders and ruling with a hand full of power and love.

Another gift presented to the Christ Child was frankincense. Frankincense was used as an offering

given to God in the temple. It would burn and the smoke would rise to the sky, like prayers ascending toward God. Christ the Son would offer his life to God the Father. As prophet, he would be in direct communication with God the Father and could accurately share the word of God with crowds and crowds of people. He would not only share God's word, but his words would become Holy Scripture itself. And Christ would not rise up toward the clouds in a fiery chariot like Elijah did. Christ would ascend toward the heavens via a cross and a tomb. He would sit on God's right-hand side in heaven above, and live forever in the hearts of believers.

The last gift was myrrh, which is used for burial purposes. The body would be tightly wrapped in cloth and then myrrh like sweet perfume would be spread over the body in reverence. Christ as the High Priest would not offer *a* sacrifice to the Lord. He would become *the* Sacrifice to the Lord on our behalf. Once and for all, he would eradicate our sin, and show us the way to eternal life with God the Father. The sacrifice was first given, when Jesus was laid in a manger as the Bread of Life, free for all to behold and take in.

The Jews might have overblown the image of the

Anointed One, the Messiah, as they hoped and waited for him. We hope and wait for the Messiah to arrive, and our images of him are just as grand. He is the Great and Powerful. He is larger than our wildest dreams. He is more magnificent than our great expectations. He is our King, our Prophet, our Priest. He is our Savior who gives us peace and rescue and joy forever.