

## The Appearance of The Messiah



From the Scroll of the Prophet Malachi 3:1 "Thus says the Lord, See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple."

There is an interesting story in the Gospel of John for which this particular scriptural passage this morning is very relevant. At the beginning of the seventh chapter of John, Jesus was lying low in Galilee. He didn't want to go into Judea anymore, we are told, because some of the Jews there were looking to kill him. Now the Jewish Festival of the Booths was near, and so Jesus' brothers (whom we are informed here did not believe in him) mocked him and said, "Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one acts in secret who wants to be widely known." "Go to the festival yourselves," Jesus

replied. "I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come." After saying this, Jesus remained in Galilee.

But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then Jesus also went, not publicly, but as it were in secret. The Jews in Jerusalem were looking for Jesus at the festival, we are told, and saying, "Where is he?" And there was considerable dispute about him among the crowds. While some were saying, "He is a good man," others were saying, "No, he is deceiving the crowd." Yet no one would speak openly about him for fear of the Jews. About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. The Jews, we are told, were astonished at his teaching, saying, "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" Jesus replied to them saying, "Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. . . Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?" The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who is trying to kill you?" Jesus answered them, "I performed one work, and all of you are astonished." This is apparently a reference either to Jesus' healing a man at Capernaum on the Sabbath, or to Jesus' earlier in the Gospel of John having cleansed the temple in Jerusalem, overturning the tables, and chasing the moneychangers out with a whip. That latter was probably the reason why some of the Jews in Jerusalem were looking to kill him.

So, some of the people there in Jerusalem at this time were saying, "Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill? And here he is, teaching openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that he is the Messiah? The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering such things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent temple police to arrest Jesus. Some in the crowd said, "This is really the prophet." Others said, "This is the Messiah." But some asked, "Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" So, there was a division in the crowd because of him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why did you not arrest him?" The police answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!" Then the Pharisees replied, "Surely you have not been deceived, too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But (only) this crowd, which does not know the law, (and) they are accursed." Now Nicodemus, who was one of the Pharisees, and who had gone to Jesus before, secretly at night, asked, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" The chief priests and Pharisees replied, "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?"

Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee." For the Jews from Judea clearly had disdain for Galileans, those backwater hillbillies.

But why is there such division amongst the larger crowd as to whether Jesus was the Messiah or not? The Hebrew word "Messiah" used here is most often translated in the New Testament into the Greek word "Christ." Both words simply mean "an anointed one." And there have been many anointed ones in the history of Israel, as kings and prophets were regularly anointed at their appointment by God. At the beginning of the first century of the Common Era, there was a longing among many of the Jews for a new Messiah, a new king, a new prophet, someone to save them from their plight under the Roman occupation of the Holy Land.

Many Jews were expecting the Messiah to call the nation of Israel to repentance and purification, as Micah says in today's reading, the Messiah would be "like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. . . and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness." So not surprisingly then the Pharisees and Sadducees earlier went down to the River Jordan to ask John the Baptist whether or not he was the Messiah, as he was calling upon the people to repent and be baptized. Others imagined the Messiah as someone like good King David, who defeated the Philistines and brought peace to the land, or like the Maccabee

brothers, who overthrew the Greek rulers of their day, and so it is not surprising that in 132 A.D. the leader of a large-scale rebellion against the Romans named Simon Bar Kochba was labeled as the long-expected Messiah by many of his day, but who was defeated by six Roman legions two years later. Meanwhile the Book of Enoch and the Essenes, a religious mystical sect, like the one living out in the wilderness where the Dead Sea scrolls were found, talked of 'one like the Son of Man' coming to save the Jews as a spiritual leader, a phrase that interestingly Jesus used repeatedly. Thus, there were simply lots and lots of different Scripture passages that hint at who the Messiah would be, but there was no agreed list of acceptable proof texts, then, or now. Indeed, there are still disputes among contemporary Jews about who the Messiah is or will be, and there have been many others throughout history who have been named as the Messiah.

As I preached about last week, I think we need to focus more on Jesus' teachings and his manner of life, and less on theological proclamations, which can be problematic, and divisive. For example, some in this crowd there in Jerusalem declared that Jesus cannot be the Messiah because *"we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from,"* they said. That's a reference to this passage from Malachi, where the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple and purify the people, which in the eyes of some of them Jesus did

exactly that at the cleansing of the Temple. But others read that passage from Micah so literally, that they expected the Messiah to *suddenly* appear at the Temple, so suddenly that no one would know where he was from, so Jesus couldn't be the Messiah, because they knew he was from Galilee. Others followed the prophecy of Isaiah about a young woman giving birth to a king in Bethlehem of Judea, and although Matthew and Luke in different ways tried to tie Jesus to this prophecy, the crowd in Jerusalem apparently knew nothing about this supposed connection. Yet many in this crowd, we are told, believed in Jesus and were saying, "When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?" So, there was division in the crowd about him. Hence, we as Christians must assign the title of Christ to Jesus lightly, I think, for its meaning and implications are not agreed upon, and have never been clear. Calling Jesus, the Christ, is more a sign of our affirmation, than proclamation. What Jesus taught, however, is far more significant, I believe.

So finally, at the end of this seventh chapter of the Gospel of John, the scribes and the Pharisees in Jerusalem remembering how Jesus had publicly accused them of not keeping the law of Moses, brought a woman before all of them, a woman who had been caught in adultery; (and) they said to Jesus, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now the law of Moses commands us to stone such women. So, what do you say?' They

said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him, the story says. When they kept on questioning him, Jesus straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone.' When the scribes and Pharisees heard this, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. **Amen.**