

**THE MESSIAH WE'VE GOT**  
*Sermon for Advent 3A-Mt 11:2-11*  
LPC, 12/11/16

I have been invited to speak at an interfaith rally downtown in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to take place on the weekend which honors him in January. I am sure I was asked to demonstrate in part the diversity of people who honor Dr. King and are inspired by him, and not because I am any kind of authority on him (Which I am not). At any rate, the prospect of speaking to a room of people who know more about my subject than I do has sent me scurrying to the internet to do some research so that I don't embarrass myself.

It is interesting to do historical research about events that I am old enough to remember when they happened. One of the things of which I was reminded is that, at the time, Dr. King came under criticism from within the African-American community itself. As you may recall, the Black Power movement split from Dr. King because they believed he did not go far enough.

Dr. King never publicly condemned the Black Power movement but privately expressed misgiving that the use of the term Black Power had the potential to compromise the non-violence to which King himself was passionately committed. He based his confidence in non-violent protest on the success of the non-violent movement for freedom led by Mahatma Gandhi in India. He also believed this type of non-violent approach best embodied the teachings of Jesus Christ, to whom he had dedicated his life.

This frustrated some of Dr. King's original followers who had come to believe that the inherent violence of racism might in many cases only be overcome by the only language racists apparently understood, namely violence itself. The most frustrated followers left King's entourage and formed other groups.

Schisms within the ranks of great movements are not uncommon. People start out united by a cause, but come to differ about methods. Followers become disenchanted. Nuances of ideology can become amplified, creating rifts possibly more bitter than the one between the protesters and their original opponents.

This happened to Dr. King, and it happened to his Lord before him. This story from the Gospel of Matthew about John the Baptist may be an example of the latter.

Last week we were introduced to the adult John the Baptist, who was predicting the coming of "the one after." This "one," whose very sandals John felt unworthy to touch, would cut down the unproductive trees, thresh the worthless husks from the grain, and burn the insubstantial chaff.

It may be helpful to describe what threshing meant in the first century. In threshing the bunch of dried wheat was either beaten against the floor, or beaten with a mallet to release the edible parts from the worthless parts. In any event, the three activities that John attributes to the coming Messiah (hewing, threshing and burning) are aggressive, if not violent, actions.

These metaphors are in the first place meaningful to John's audience. Cutting trees, threshing wheat and burning chaff were part of daily life for first century folks. Moreover these

metaphors are consistent with Old Testament prophecies of what the Messiah would do. The Messiah was coming to bring freedom to God's people, setting the world to rights, judging and destroying evil, often forcibly.

Our Gospel lesson last week ended before describing John's actual meeting with Jesus. This is what happens next. After John predicts the coming of the Messiah, Jesus actually shows up. John clearly recognizes Jesus as being "the one," for John protests, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

In other words, John knew that Jesus was the Messiah, at least at that moment. So why, now, eight chapters later, is John sending his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the "one to come?" Doesn't he already know this?

Biblical scholar Eugene Boring suggests that John is having second thoughts about Jesus. Presumably, hearing tales in prison about what Jesus is actually doing, John is having his doubts. Why would that be, unless Jesus were in some way not living into what John had been expecting the Messiah to do?

We know that many people who initially believed in Jesus' messiahship eventually questioned whether he was going about it the right way. When Jesus entered Jerusalem the last time, he was welcomed exuberantly by a crowd shouting "Hosanna!", yet less than a week later the same crowd was shouting "Crucify him!" We know that Jesus was taunted on the cross, and was dared to exercise his divine powers to save himself and his fellow criminals.

Just as people were disappointed in Dr. King's methods, people were disappointed in Jesus' methods. Why did he not overthrow corrupt government? Why did he not squash evildoers? Why did he heal some people but not everybody? Why did he not save his suffering people from their oppressors once and for all ?

Why doesn't God do these things today? Why doesn't God strike down evil empires? Why doesn't he punish greedy executives and raise up the poor as he is supposed to do? Why doesn't God destroy the immoral and reward the God-fearing? Why doesn't Christ come again *now* and put an end to all this wickedness and pain?

Even today, the Messiah we get is not always the Messiah we believe we were promised. We expect drastic changes from him. We expect mighty works of power which aggressively destroy evil instead of intimate acts of healing love.

Jesus' message to us is the same as his message to John's disciples: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them." This is the kind of work our Messiah does, not an aggressive campaign against evil. When the blind see, the lame walk, and the poor are set free, our Messiah is at work. This is work of salvation and redemption. This is the work we are asked to join in.

If we do this work, like Jesus, like Dr. King, we can expect opposition, even violence. But this is the work of the Messiah we've got, whether we like it or not. If our Messiah had been a warrior king, he may only have stirred up more violence, as have so many before him. But the Messiah we've got heals, forgives, feeds, liberates, loves. And that's a game changer.