

“Our Messianic Mess”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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Martin Buber was one of the great Jewish interpreters of Hebrew scripture. He was born on February 8, 1878 in Vienna, Austria. He died on June 13, 1965 in Jerusalem. Over the course of his life, Martin Buber had much wisdom to share. His published writings are countless, but there was one question that Martin Buber just couldn't answer with absolute certainty, and that was a question asked of him at a gathering of Christian clergy in 1952--“Why” the Christian clergymen asked “do Jews not accept Jesus as The Messiah?” to which he answered “What is the difference between Jews and Christians? We all await the Messiah. You believe He has already come and gone while we Jews do not. I propose we await Him together, and when He appears we can ask Him together ‘Were You here before’, and I hope that, at that moment, I will be close enough to whisper in His ear, ‘For the love of heaven, please don't answer’”.

We all await The Messiah. In our day and time, it is a stunning claim to make that we all, Christians and Jews together, await The Messiah. If you are a Jew, you await the coming of The Messiah for the first time, a Davidic Messiah, a Messiah like King David, who comes with social, political and military power. If you are a Christian, you will await the return of The Messiah for a second time—this Messiah being Jesus, this Messiah being not like King David, this Messiah being more spiritualized, more about personal salvation, this Messiah not inhabiting an earthly throne but, nonetheless, a Messiah coming back—coming back to straighten things out, coming back to make the world right. The noun “Messiah” is derived from the Hebrew verb which means “to anoint”. The act of anointing involves being specially designated by God for a particular task, so the anointed one, The Messiah, is a person designated with special powers and authority for a special God-given task.

In Ancient Israel, priests were anointed, prophets were anointed and, of course, kings were anointed, and the idea of a final Messiah, an anointed one coming to restore the power and grandeur of Israel under David was, at its core, a response to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587. It was out of that despair, pain and loss of their nation that Israel would begin to dream and long for a Messiah. It is the tradition from which we talk about The Messiah. They waited, and some Jews today still wait, for a human political agent who will come and reassert power at the behest of their god, Yahweh. It is a longing that is ancient and tribal in its essence.

In the wake of the most recent terrorist attacks in Paris and Maui, the Christian celebration of the birth of The Messiah is freighted with theological danger. While in recent history we have tried to de-politicize and spiritualize the claims of Jesus as The Messiah, such claims always leave us on the slippery slope of a fate-based tribalism. Fate-based tribalism is the idea that our God is better than your God. This tribalism is around our world and being raised in our world. Listen to the recent disturbing Facebook post by Franklin Graham, the son of the beloved Billy Graham. On this post from Franklin Graham, after going through a litany of recent terrorist attacks, documenting the death and destruction left in their wake, he ends by saying this: “I don't know about you, but I don't want to live under Islam. I will bow my knee to no one except almighty God. The Bible says that one day in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow of those in heaven and those on earth, and that every tongue

should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and the glory of God the Father, and this will include the Muslims”, so the temptation to turn our faith in Jesus into a brutal tribal claim of absolute righteousness is the very same belief system that underwrites the wing of militant Islam that we have rightfully identified as so destructive, but our temptation to say that our God is better than your God is very real and very destructive, so how we claim the Messiah-ship of Jesus is of utmost importance in our day, for if we make the claim that Jesus, The Messiah, is the end of the discussion, we have then fully entered into the ancient tribal notions of God where genocide and slaughter are God’s will. This is the consequence of our smaller and smaller world.

When Martin Buber answered the question about why Jews didn’t claim Jesus as The Messiah, he did it with humor and a sense of common fellowship. He said “I propose we all await The Messiah together”. That is the great challenge that awaits people of faith in our day and time. Can we, the people of all the faith traditions of the world, wait together? Can we, in our spiritual journeys, get to a place where we all understand that we only have a piece of the truth, that we all desperately need one another to have a fuller understanding of the truth of our lives, that God’s revelation in history is not finished yet and that there is yet much more work to be done and that that work is now way beyond just Christians and Jews and discussions about Messiah? It is a much bigger discussion that is desperately needed in our world, and it is happening.

It was only a few weeks ago when over 10,000 people gathered in Salt Lake City, Utah for the 2015 Parliament of the World’s Religions. At this meeting, 50 different faith traditions from 80 nations around the world came together. There were over 600 presentations about God and faith and interfaith dialogue. At this Parliament of the World’s Religions, Rabbi Ted Falcon, Imam Jamal Rahman, and Reverend Don MacKenzie, The Three Interfaith Amigos, who were with us just two years ago, were there also. In writing about his experience there, Rabbi Ted Falcon said this: “At this amazing gathering of people of faith throughout all over the world, we learned many things, but the greatest thing we learned was the gift of transcending the need to prove ourselves right”—the gift of transcending the need to prove ourselves right. If Christians are to be responsible people of faith in a world of over 80 different faith traditions, a world that is smaller and smaller, we will need to rethink our concept of Jesus as The Messiah. While Jesus is our Messiah, our Anointed One in our tradition, perhaps He is not the only Messiah.

Advent season gives us an opportunity to open up the story. God is always doing something new. We believe that or we don’t, but scripture testifies that God is always at work blowing up our certainties and expanding our concepts of what is possible, so this Advent season, perhaps this can be a time for us to embrace in a new way The Anointed One, to embrace in a new way the path and the gift and the promise of Jesus, and to embrace in a new way the piece of the truth that we have in Christ. Our world is a dangerous place, and it is a dangerous place partly because of religion—religion that says that our way is the only way and our Messiah is the only Messiah, but I believe that it is an opportunity for us to say that God is bigger than just one tradition, that our tradition is our path but not the only path, and I believe that God is at work in this world among us to spread that news in this joyous season. Thanks be to God. Amen.