

“Christ...The Messiah?”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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Well, they warned us all week long. With a little graphic up in the left-hand corner and some cautionary words, they warned us. They warned us that the Thanksgiving edition of the News & Record newspaper would be especially large, and large it was! Filled with advertisements for the Black Friday sales, this newspaper was about the size of a big, chunky piece of firewood and weighed about three pounds. Now, the advertisements and the flyers in the paper were overwhelming, but what I found even more overwhelming were the nine pages that listed the schedule of all of the Christmas TV specials—show after show, movie after movie, spanning the TV era beginning with the 1947 classic “It Happened On Fifth Avenue” and taking us all the way up to new programs produced especially for 2014—nine pages!

Now, of all of these TV Christmas specials, one program that I have always liked the best, and the one program that really raises the question that we all need to grapple with in this day and time is the TV special “A Charlie Brown Christmas”. Released in 1965, this cartoon was ahead of its time. It documents the struggle that Charlie Brown had with the meaning of Christmas, and it is a struggle that he has that culminates in his impassioned plea to his friends at the Christmas pageant special when he yells out “Is there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?”

Well, we know, of course, that despite all the commercialism of this season, Christmas is for Christians about the birth of Jesus Christ, and it is with that phrase “Jesus Christ” that we must begin when we try to answer the question of what Christmas is all about.

In our day and time, Jesus Christ has simply become a proper name as if His first name was Jesus and His last name was Christ. In fact, however, Christ was originally not a name but a title. Christ is the Greek translation word “Christos” of the Hebrew word “Mashiac” which means “Messiah”, so the name Jesus Christ means “Jesus, The Messiah”. It is a title, and the early followers of Jesus, in the development of the early church, saw in Jesus the fulfillment of messianic expectations of a Messiah, so when we say Jesus Christ, or Jesus the Christ, we are making a theological claim about Jesus. We are claiming that He is The Messiah, and this claim of making Jesus the Messiah connects us directly to the ancient Jewish expectations and hopes for the coming of a Messiah. So what, in fact, is a Messiah?

The word “Messiah” derives from a Hebrew verb which means “to anoint”, so a Messiah is one who is anointed which means a person who is especially designated by God for a particular task through the anointing by oil. In the early Israelite traditions, certain individuals were anointed for a variety of roles including priests and prophets and judges. These people were called to a particular God-given task that required special empowerment and authorization by God and, even perhaps more importantly, by the community of faith so there were big ritual ceremonies and anointing of leaders in Israel, so Messiahs, people in explicitly designated roles, were very common in the religious and political structures of ancient Israel.

Now, where this all connects more directly with our sense of Jesus as Messiah is that for ancient Jews and for some Jews today, the wait for The Messiah continues. For the Israelites, the label “Messiah” became primarily associated with King David and the kings in the Davidic line after him, so King David, who served from 1000 to 960 B.C.E., for 40 years, and the Davidic line of kings which included 20

subsequent leaders for 400 years, David and those 20 kings became the model for Messiah.

In the imagination of the Israelites over time, they would consistently remember back to King David as the glory days for their nation. They would hope back for that time when King David led them as a people. They would say “Let’s wait for the new David to arrive, for the new Messiah to save us”, and this longing for a leader really became more powerful and more central to their idea of Messiah when they were destroyed by Babylon in 587, and they were now without a nation. They were without a leader. They were without a Temple. They were without a city. They were in exile, so they longed for a Messiah. They wanted someone like King David to come and save them and captivate their imagination. We want, and we will wait for God’s Messiah to come and save us. This Messiah in Jewish imagination would be an anointed one who would straighten out the world and who would bring Shalom and peace to a disparaged and an abandoned Israel.

So, in Luke this morning, that gospel narrative that I read, the followers of John the Baptist asked the question “Are you the one who is to come?” They are asking Jesus “Are you the next Messiah to come in the long line of Davidic kings? Are you the next David? Are you the one we have been waiting for?” They are dying for someone to save them. They want a leader to come back, regroup them and put them back in their nation again with God’s favor because they have been exiled and alone. This expectation of a Messiah was still alive and well with some thought that Jesus would be The Messiah. That makes our Advent season so connected to our Jewish ancestors. We are so connected to the Jewish faith that at Advent it is just almost powerful. We wait for Messiah like the Jews, and we claim Jesus as The Messiah.

Now, when Charlie Brown puts forth his question in regards to what Christmas is all about, it is his wise friend, Linus, who gives him the answer, and Linus, who was quoting roughly from Luke, Chapter 2, and taking on the voice of the angel, says “Do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord”.

Bethlehem, where our story of faith says Jesus was born, is also where King David was born. Jesus is, through our gospel accounts, born right there in the seat of Davidic power. He is, in the gospels, positioned as the legitimate heir, and He will be claimed by the church then and the church now as The Messiah, but it is different.

In claiming Jesus as Messiah, Christians radically reinterpreted what Judaism meant by Messiah because, for Jews, Messiah undeniably referred to a worldly political and military leader who sat on an earthly throne just like King David. It was this notion of Jesus as Messiah that became the grounds for his crucifixion at the hands of the Roman Empire. They thought if Jesus was The Messiah for the Jewish people, that He was going to bring an army and overthrow the Empire, so they had to kill Him, so the concept of Messiah as a Davidic leader was a revolutionary, political threat that Rome could not tolerate and, even though in subsequent years, the church has tried to spiritualize and de-politicize the notion of Jesus as Messiah, Jesus’ announcement in Luke 4 reveals His messianic, political agenda. If you remember, in Luke 4 Jesus began His ministry. He took out the scroll of Isaiah, the prophet, and He said “The spirit of the Lord is upon me” because He has anointed me. He has made me Messiah to bring good news to the poor, to release the captives, to bring sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free”, so Jesus clearly sets himself in that tradition of being Messiah, of being Savior to the world, of being political and of not just being spiritual.

So, here we are again, in the season of the year when the church most loudly proclaims that Jesus is

the Messiah. That is what we say in all that we do in the season. We say that the Messiah is coming, and it is a proclamation that is made at a time when it is increasingly difficult for the world to hear anything, but what is perhaps most important at this moment in history is not for the world to hear it, but for the church to live it. The church is called to live the truth that Jesus is The Messiah—that Jesus is The Anointed One.

Jesus, like the Davidic line that He is claimed to come out of, has come to reveal and reign over a kingdom, but unlike the Davidic power that He is claimed to come out of, it is not a kingdom with territorial boundaries. Rather, it is a kingdom made up of those who would commit their lives to God and live in obedience to God's will revealed in Jesus' teachings. So, the kingdom is here, the kingdom is now, the kingdom is where we live that kingdom out as followers of Jesus. We are the ones who embody God's newness for the world, and we are to model that kingdom in how we live and what we do for our neighbor.

So, in 2014, Jesus' messianic rule is not the reign of King of the throne in this world like King David. It is not like that, but it is a reign which is revealed in the lives of His followers. We are His followers. We reveal Jesus' reign to the world. People are to look at the church and say "That is how the kingdom is supposed to be. That is how Jesus' followers are to build that kingdom—pod by pod by pod, community of faith by community of faith by community of faith, church by church by church". That is what it is supposed to be, and what we hope is that people out there look at us and say "Oh, my gosh! They share, they forgive each other, they love one another, they speak out for a fair world" and the kingdom takes shape like that. As we claim Jesus as The Messiah, we are proclaiming that Jesus is The Anointed One and that His kingdom—a kingdom of hope, peace, love and joy—takes shape where we are gathered, and it takes shape in what we do.

In this Advent season, may we embody the peace of Christ, the love of Christ, the joy of community, and the hope that is our rock. Let us proclaim with our lives that Jesus is The Messiah. Thanks be to God. Amen.