

20 December 2020

Witness to the Light
John 1:6-9, 19-29

Last week, in our study of different prophecies that were thought to refer to the Messiah, we looked at Malachi, chapter 4, where that prophet gleefully imagined a Messiah who would come to utterly crush evildoers. I took the perhaps unusual position that this messianic vision found in our Holy Scriptures was simply wrong. The Christ who came was the opposite of the Christ that Malachi wanted. But in the last couple of verses of the reading from Malachi, the prophet added that before the “great and terrible Day of the Lord,” Elijah would come back, and that promise is the very last thing that we read in our Bibles before we turn the page and start the New Testament.

So before we have our scripture today, let me talk about what that prophecy and the figure of Elijah meant to Jews in Jesus’ time. You remember the story of Jesus’ Transfiguration in the gospels, when Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain and they saw him transformed and joined by two figures whom they realized were Moses and Elijah. Now we talked about Moses a few weeks ago, how he had come to represent the founding of Israel as a people and, above all, the law and covenant that set them apart as God’s Chosen People. Well, alongside this towering figure, standing as an equal, is the prophet Elijah. We’ll get to Elijah in more detail next year, as we continue our survey of the Bible Story, but let me quickly summarize why he is granted equal footing with the great Moses.

Elijah was a ragged, uncouth, abrasive wild man who lived during the years of the two Israelite kingdoms. He would appear suddenly out of the desert with some dark and generally critical message from God, then speak truth to power, condemning the idolatry of the Israelite kings, and disappear back into the desert. God listened to Elijah. When Elijah called for a drought, the land had drought, and when he summoned rain, it rained. Elijah was absolutely incorruptible in his devotion to God; he gave up everything – comfort, safety, family, friends – and in return, God protected him from those who wanted to kill him, and they were many. Elijah had a host of human weaknesses, and like Moses before him, he could get testy with God, but he was a man of intense commitment and unimpeachable integrity. Even during his life, he inspired awe. Kings and queens feared him, and bands of prophets in the desert called him Father, and at the end of his life, God honored Elijah by sparing him death itself and taking him alive to heaven in a fiery chariot. There is no Book of Elijah. We have no written record of his message, only the stories, but they are enough. Yes, this man stands co-equal with Moses, and so it is not surprising that Malachi’s final promise – that Elijah would return – caught the attention and the imagination of the Jewish people.

Eight hundred years after Elijah and maybe four hundred after Malachi, in the years of the Roman Empire, rumors began filtering out of the Judean desert where Elijah had hidden. This desert, just to the east of Jerusalem, had long been a place of mystery. Bandits had had hideouts in the caves there. David hid there from Saul. Occasionally, radical religious sects or political parties took refuge out there and formed monastic communities or built fortresses. And out of that wilderness came stories of a fierce, ragged, abrasive preacher in rough clothes, proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God and calling for people to repent of their sins. Those who answered that call, this man would dunk into the waters of the Jordan River. This dunking thing was a familiar purification ritual. It was used at the Jerusalem temple, and it had been

adopted as an initiation practice by one of the monastic communities in the desert, but this wild man was doing it differently, as a mark of a deep cleansing rather than a temporary purification, because he taught that repentance was not just about cleaning up but was to lead to a changed life. He rejected the notion that the Chosen People had any special status with God – “So what if you’re children of Abraham? God doesn’t want children of Abraham. If he did, he could make new ones out of these rocks! God wants children of obedience!” For that reason, this man received all people, even tax-collectors and Roman soldiers, telling them to repent, to start living lives of integrity and mercy, and to look for God. And to all people, he said, “Care for each other. If you have two coats, and someone else has none, what’s wrong with you? Give one away.” The man’s name was Jonah, or John, and he was called, John the Dunker.

About seventy years later, the author of the Gospel of John reflected back on the ministry of John the Dunker in these words. We read John chapter 1, verses 6-9 and 19-29.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ ²¹And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ ²²Then they said to him, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ ²³He said,

*‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
“Make straight the way of the Lord”’,
as the prophet Isaiah said.*

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, ‘Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’ ²⁶John answered them, ‘I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’ ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. ²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’

As I’ve been saying all through Advent, the Judean people of Palestine at the time of Jesus were apparently quite focused on the promise of the Messiah. They had different pictures of the Messiah to choose from in the Hebrew scriptures, but they were all looking for one. In that context, this new preacher out in the desert, who was drawing crowds and attracting disciples, was surely exciting. Religious leaders from Jerusalem sent messengers out to talk to him. “Are you the Messiah?” they asked. “Me? No.”

“Well, then, are you Elijah?” they asked, remembering Malachi 4. This actually makes good sense. Everything about John the Dunker is reminiscent of Elijah.

But John said, “Nope.” (By the way, this is interesting. John says he wasn’t Elijah, but in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus disagrees. When the disciples ask about the Malachi passage, Jesus replies, “Elijah’s already come.” Then the disciples realize, “Oh! He means John!”)

But John himself said no. So then the messengers remembered the Deuteronomy passage about a “Prophet like Moses,” and ask, “Well, then, are you the Prophet?”

To which John replied, “No, not that either. I’m just a forerunner, one who cries out in the desert ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’ The one you’re looking for is already here. *But you won’t recognize him.*”

Finally in our passage, the next day, John looks across the river, sees Jesus, and says to his own followers, “There! That’s the one. That’s the Lamb of God, who will take away the sins of the world.”

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We human beings are all in some way looking for God, even those who deny that a God exists. We were created with a deep, unsettling awareness that there is more meaning to this world than we realize, that there is deeper truth beyond the shallowness of our normal lives and the weakness of our rational minds. In addition, most of us can’t escape the feeling that somewhere along the way we’ve missed a turn, that we ourselves are not who we are supposed to be, and those of us with that conviction are not just looking for God, we are looking for help. A Savior if you will. What we have done all through Advent is examine some of the inspired imaginings of the Old Testament writers and prophets as to what that Savior might be like.

It should be no surprise to us that they all pictured the Savior differently. We all feel our own emptiness differently and have different ideas about what might fill that void. Some, longing for Moral Order, imagined a new law-giver, like Moses. Others, dreaming of Political Order, envisioned a new king, like David. Still others, crying out for justice from the depths of anger and oppression, imagined the Savior as an avenger who would show those evildoers something that they won’t forget. Some of these imaginings are better than others; none of them really are complete. You see, the darkness of our own minds is so profound that even those of us who are dimly aware that something’s gone wrong are unable to imagine what we need to fix us.

John the Dunker came closest. His message, first, was that our job was not just to wait and look for the Savior but to prepare. Repent of our sins and then live lives worthy of that repentance. Live lives of integrity and compassion, or your repentance is bull. (My guess is that John would have spelled that out more.) Second, he said that the one who is coming, the one we are waiting for, is not coming to fix our circumstances. He’s not coming to restore morality or sovereignty or to make the world *fair*. The coming one will not fix our difficulties. Life is difficult. Instead, the Savior is coming to fix *us*. He will do this not as a king or as a prophet. What he will do, he will do as a lamb. He is coming to be sacrificed.

Then John added, “In fact, he’s already here, and you don’t see him. Nor will you.” And he was right. Those who wanted the Messiah of their own imaginings didn’t recognize him when he came. Those who already knew what the Messiah was supposed to look like were unable to identify him when he came in an unexpected way. Meanwhile, we, living two thousand years later, are in a different and yet not-so-different position. We have the Gospels before us, laying out in word and story what the Savior actually looks like, so that’s good, right? But we also have two thousand years of Christian history to prove that we are capable of ignoring that and continuing to define Christ in terms of our own preferences. We still look for the Christ we want instead of listening for the Christ who is. I’ve told this story before, but here it comes again. In the Middle Ages, a certain nobleman’s son was ordained a bishop, which was a good second-best career for younger sons of the nobility and didn’t necessarily mean that he gave a flip about Christianity. But this particular bishop seems to have had some sense of responsibility, because

he said, “You know, now that I’m a bishop, I probably ought to read the Gospels some time.” So, for the first time in his life, he sat down to read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. When he was done, he said, “Either this is not the gospel, or we are not Christian.”

We do have a Savior. But resist the impulse to imagine that Savior in our own terms and to design him according to our own specs. He is bigger than our imagination, and better. Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Emmanuel. God with us.