

“Could This Be the Christ?”

In the weeks before Christmas, I had the opportunity to meet with the Lifeliners, our high school group, and we watched a movie together, the Nativity Story. As we watched, I asked them to consider how much of the movie was true to the biblical account, and how much was added or changed or adjusted for the sake of making a good movie. Apparently, one thing stuck out to them where the movie differed from what really happened. On many of the answer sheets that I read, the students put something like “I don’t think they spoke English.”

Fortunately, they noticed some other things as well. So did I. One of the points in the movie that struck me was the emphasis on what I would call the messianic expectation. That is, throughout the movie there were a number of people portrayed as searching intently to find the one that God had promised, the Messiah. Jewish citizens were waiting for the Messiah to come and to fulfill prophecy. The king, Herod, was anxious because he knew that the people wanted a Messiah to rid them of Roman rule and really to replace him as their king. And that worrying does help us to understand how Herod might turn around in fear and anger and order the deaths of the young boys in Bethlehem.

And shortly before that order, the movie shows Herod being shocked and surprised. He was shocked and surprised when the Magi came to him looking for the Messiah, but they were not looking for a man, a grown man like Herod expected. They were looking for a baby, a child.

We heard last week as we celebrated Epiphany how they found that child, Jesus. They worshipped him and gave him gifts before returning to their homes.

Today our text takes us to the time after that baby had grown up. Jesus was around thirty years old. But all around him, one thing had remained the same. People were still waiting. People were still looking for the Messiah and hoping and praying for God to keep his promises and fulfill his prophecies.

Our text takes us to the time of John the Baptist. He was just a little older than Jesus, and he began preaching and teaching in the wilderness. He began baptizing those who came to him and repented of their sins. You might recall how we spoke about John during the season of Advent and saw how he prepared the hearts of people waiting for the Messiah to come. We even used some of the same verses from our text today.

But today isn’t about waiting and wondering. It is about revealing. It is about Jesus shining forth as the Savior of the world. It continues the Epiphany message that Jesus came for all people. It clearly answers the question, “Could this be the Christ?”

When the people started asking that question, though, they had it wrong. They were looking at this wilderness preacher and baptizer and wondering if he was the Christ. He wasn’t John was there to point to the Christ, and that is what he did. **“The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”**

There are several points worth our consideration in just these few verses. First, note how humble John was. He knew and he understood his role. He was a popular preacher. The people were coming out to hear him. In that sense, we might compare him in some ways to today’s television preachers or meg-church leaders. But in an area where they too often fall short, John did exactly what God expected from him. He pointed to Christ. He said, “I am a sinner, just like every one of you. I’m not the Savior. I’m not even worthy to touch his dirty sandals. I have a job to do, but he’s going to do things so much greater than anything you see from me.”

That sort of humility is a gift from God. You and I know how that doesn't come naturally. You know how we like to build ourselves up, even if it means tearing others down. You know how easy it is to say "Oh yeah, I'm a sinner. Nobody's perfect." But at the same time it is so hard to look into our hearts and our minds and to admit the selfishness that resides there. It is so hard to look at our actions and say that they have all too often been completely worthless. But John realized these things about himself, and he spoke about them to those who listened to him.

And he told them how serious their sin really was. He went on to describe Christ's work this way: **"His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."** Most of us are not terribly familiar with the picture here of threshing and winnowing, but the point is obvious. Part of Christ's work is separating, like a farmer separates the chaff, the useless outer shell of the wheat, from the wheat kernels. The chaff gets thrown into the fire to be burned. Only the fire John spoke about is an unquenchable fire, the fires of hell that sinners deserve.

John pointed the people to Christ, and soon enough, that Christ was revealed. **"When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove."** Along with all the sinners who were baptized by John came Jesus. As is clear from this and many other places in Scripture, he was not there because of his own sins. He was baptized to identify himself with sinners whose place he was taking under God's law and whose death he would one day die. He was clearly revealed to be the Christ by his anointing by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus went to John in the Jordan River. The Bible doesn't mention the exact manner in which water was applied to Jesus, but whether it was sprinkled or poured on him or he was lowered into the water really is not the point. He was baptized, and he prayed, and heaven opened up to reveal the Holy Spirit descending like a dove. Where kings and priests had once been anointed by oil to place them into their office, Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit. He was set apart—chosen for his special work. He is the Christ. He is the Anointed One. You may have already noticed how I've used the words Christ and Messiah almost interchangeably in this sermon, and this is why: both mean the anointed one. Both refer to the one that God had promised as the Savior of the world. Throughout the Old Testament era, he was called the Messiah based on the Hebrew word. To Greek speakers in the New Testament, he is the Christ. And at various times and in various ways Jesus was revealed as the anointed one. Here at his baptism, we hear how the Holy Spirit anointed him.

And his anointing was confirmed by the Father. **And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."** Who is this man who is more powerful than John? He is God's own eternal Son. He is the beloved. He is one with whom the Father is perfectly pleased. In other words, he is the one, really the only one, who was in a position to save sinners. He became a true human being, and lived with the expectations and situations of a true human being but was without sin. And he would continue to please his heavenly Father all the way to his death on the cross in obedience to God's will to save and rescue a world of sinners.

And as John foretold, he would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The same Holy Spirit that anointed the Savior would work in the hearts and lives of his followers. It is with good reason that on the Sunday when we observe the baptism of our Lord, we also consider our own baptisms. Through this precious gift, God sends his Holy Spirit into hearts to create and strengthen faith. Because of the baptism and work of our Savior, our baptism brings us the forgiveness of sins and along with it eternal life and salvation.

Could this be the Christ? Not John the Baptist, but Jesus to whom he pointed, anointed by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by the Father. We have seen him revealed. May we continue to earnestly seek him.

Sermon Text: Luke 3:15–17, 21-22 (NIV84)

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”