

# ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Epiphany 1-C (9 January 2022)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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## Collect

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

*Isaiah 43:1-7, Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22, Psalm 29*

## 1 Expectations of the Messiah

“...the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.”<sup>1</sup>

*In nomine patris...*

The people were looking for a Messiah. They knew to expect one. It was in the air, all anyone talked about. They wondered whether John might be the one.

It's hard to find a passage of Scripture that more aptly describes our world today. Messiah is a word we don't use quite as much, though we do around the edges when we sometimes refer to someone as having a “Messiah complex.” We usually use other terms, though. Words like “superhero.” Marvel and DC have been making bank with their superhero movies in recent years, each one bigger and more extravagant than the last! I frequently comment to my family about how ridiculous it is when every episode, whether of a Marvel movie or the new series of Dr. Who episodes, can never just be about making life better for somebody or overcoming a personal challenge. They all have to top each other in being about the existence of the entire universe or the destruction of time itself. How many movies are there that are *not* about the hero who changes the world and saves the day?

Back when the original Matrix movie came out, I didn't see it in person because I didn't have a lot of cash for tickets and I was suspicious of all the hype. I saw it later and found it entrancing. Especially for its bold use of theological **language and ideas**, making explicit that which other movies hid behind masks and capes. It was all about “the one” foretold by the “oracle.” A person who seemed ordinary and unexceptional but who would turn out to wield unthinkable power and thus “bring peace,” which chiefly meant “victory against our enemies.” You can take all the darkness and the violence, the hopes and the expectations, and what you have in the Matrix is a pretty interesting re-telling of the prophet Isaiah in our Bibles.

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<sup>1</sup>Lk 3.15 NRSV.

Superhero movies continue to draw audiences like never before. And their boldness, their audacity in imagining these super-human people, has bled over into our life together in sports and politics and even church. We look for heroes, and when people are willing to put on that mantle, to wear the cape and the spandex, we as a society tend to be ready to embrace and celebrate that person, projecting all our own hopes and fears and insecurities onto them.

We, humankind, seem to have these broad, desperate needs that leave us vulnerable to believing the charlatans, the liars, the manipulators, if only they'll tell us what we want to hear. We hunger and thirst for resources, for power, for military supremacy, for security, for vindication and assurance that we are right. We as individuals hunger wealth, for security, and for respect, in hopes that those will make it possible to fulfill our even deeper needs for intimacy, for love and for approval.

## 2 Looking for the Messiah in the Desert

In our Gospel reading today, the people coming to John were looking for all the same things. They were looking for a superhero! Because John was baptizing, we tend to pigeon-hole his listeners as “religious seekers.” But there were no distinctions for John’s audience between “religion” and “the state.” The struggle of faith was the struggle of our God versus your gods. The Roman occupiers were a religious problem. And the hopes that the people had, based on a long line of prophets with Isaiah at the center, were hopes for freedom. There was a military solution to be had, and that solution would be achieved once the Messiah, that divine superhero that had been foretold, finally showed up and effected the end of Israel’s oppression. Rebellions often began out in the desert. Here was John, building up a large following: maybe he would be the one!

## 3 John Adjusts Expectations

John quickly tells the people, and tells them plainly, “No: you don’t understand what’s going on yet.” John warns the people not to pin their hopes on him: the Messiah is going to be **so** much bigger and more powerful than he is that John won’t even be worthy to act as the Messiah’s valet! Not only will the Messiah be different and better than John, but his baptism, his induction into his community, will be vastly different as well. Because that baptism will be done not just with water, but with water and fire: with a whole different level of power.

In other words, this coming superhero is not just going to change the world. His work will be on a whole different magnitude, and it will be about changing *you*. The coming Messiah will drown you not just in water, but in the Holy Spirit: you will be immersed in God’s Spirit and it will feel like fire. Fire, in John’s little parable, is used to burn away the impurities, the dead-weight, the things that hold us back and distract us from the genuine work of God in our lives. It’s the capes and the spandex and the pinning our hopes on someday, somewhere, someone, some achievement, some job, some bank balance, some retirement! The chaff is all the things that Israel thought a Messiah might be, hoped and dreamed a Messiah might be, the things **we** want the Messiah to be, but which God did not actually intend for Jesus to be. The fire that comes with baptism into Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, is a fire that hurts, but leaves behind something clean, pure, ready to encounter God.

## 4 Gifts of the Holy Spirit

That encounter with God is what Jesus shows us in his own baptism. It's as if Jesus was demonstrating, this is how it goes down, this is what's supposed to happen. Jesus says, follow me! Do it this way!

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."<sup>2</sup>

Notice what happens here. Jesus is baptized. Jesus prays. Jesus encounters God who says to him three things: 1. Mine: you are my child. 2. Beloved: I love you. 3. Delight: delight or approval characterize my perception of you

Intimacy, love, and approval are the fruit of the Holy Spirit, what happens when Jesus claims that Spirit in baptism and opens himself to it in prayer. Friends, that is the work we are about here at church!

Howard Thurman, one-time dean of the chapel at Boston University and canon of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, offers this summary of the work God does in a person:

Through prayer, meditation, and singleness of mind, the individual's life may be invaded by strength, insight, and courage sufficient for his needs.<sup>3</sup>

Dear ones, you're not going to find the superhero you are looking for in your lover's house, in the movie house, or even in the White House. If you're looking for help finding a superhero, a savior, a Messiah, you need to come to the church house!

Christians, we gather to claim God's promises. God has promised a Messiah – but not necessarily the Messiah you were expecting. It's not a Messiah that will make you rich or powerful or good looking. Instead it's a Messiah with the power to burn away the things that are eating from the inside, those secondary desires and obsessions that distract you from God, and liberate you to experience the things you long for most deeply. God has claimed you as God's own. God loves you. God delights in you. Intimacy, love, and approval are the gifts of the Holy Spirit that await every believer who will truly depend on God set aside everything else. This is God's invitation to you today.

**Amen.**

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<sup>2</sup>Lk 3.21f.

<sup>3</sup>Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, quoted by Shively Smith on [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org).