

St. Columba Episcopal Church, Boothbay Harbor, Maine

Advent 2021 Meditations: Jesus' Ministry

Donald Kraus

Advent 1: Nov. 28, 2021

Advent is a season of waiting. But “waiting” can be very different when we are waiting in expectation, in hope and faith. There were times in Jesus’ life when he was waiting, especially when he was waiting to begin his ministry: waiting to understand what he was being called to do, waiting to learn how to do it, and waiting until the time was right for him to begin. Jesus grew into being “the Messiah,” and part of that growth meant that he had to wait. Jesus waited for God in his life, and so too we can wait in hope and faith.

What is a “messiah”? *Messiah* (in Hebrew, *mashshiach*) means “anointed,” that is, marked with oil applied, usually, to the top of the head or the forehead. The Greek word for this is *christos*, from which we get our title “Christ” for Jesus.

In the Bible, people were “anointed” as an indication that they were designated, or set aside, for a particular task. Kings and priests were anointed, and the Bible refers to them as “God’s anointed one” or similar phrases. As time went on, this title became more specialized in referring to a person who would come among the remaining people of Israel, unite them, and lead them to a renewed kingdom like that of King David. At the time of Jesus, people looked back to David as the ideal king of a thousand years before who brought together the nation of Israel and led it successfully for 40 years.

But what was the situation of the Jewish people, including Jesus, at the time? For 600 years, the Jews had lived under foreign rule: oppressed by the Assyrians and conquered by the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. There had been no “King of the Jews” for all this time.

They also had not heard the word of God as announced by a prophet. The last prophet, Malachi, had spoken 400 years before. The rabbis referred to a prophet’s utterances as *ha-qol*, “the Voice,” meaning the word of God. For all these centuries, they had not had “the Voice,” only what they called *bat ha-qol*, the “daughter of the Voice” – an echo. There seemed to be no guidance about what to do.

Jesus had a sense, from his boyhood, that a task or a mission lay before him. But the nature of that task was not clear. So he waited, along with his people, the Jews, for some sign that his task should begin.

And then, it seemed, the 400-year-long silence of God was coming to an end. There was a Voice in the wilderness, one calling to “prepare the way of the Lord,” to “make a straight path for God through the desert.” That Voice was a man named John, whom we call John the Baptist, who urged the people to admit their wrongdoing, agree to do it no longer, accept their new relationship to God, and – to seal their new state – receive from John immersion in the water of the Jordan River, an ancient practice of

the Hebrew law that signified purification and a renewed ability to come into God's presence in the Temple.

Was this the sign that Jesus was looking for? And what did it mean for him? He went out to the wilderness to meet John, even though he felt no need for purification. He was immersed, baptized, along with others. And when he came out of the water he heard a Voice from God, with a title that had been given to Israel's kings centuries before: "You are My Son."

Next week we'll see how Jesus determined what his task really was.

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Advent 2: Dec. 5, 2021

Advent is a season of waiting. But "waiting" can be very different when we are waiting in expectation, in hope and faith. There were times in Jesus' life when he was waiting, especially when he was waiting to begin his ministry: waiting to understand what he was being called to do, waiting to learn how to do it, and waiting until the time was right for him to begin. Jesus grew into being "the Messiah," and part of that growth meant that he had to wait. Jesus waited for God in his life, and so too we can wait in hope and faith.

Last week we saw that Jesus, who had felt a call from God to carry out a mission, took his experience at John's baptism as a signal for the beginning of his ministry. But what should that ministry be? In hopes of finding out, Jesus undertook a further quest for God's word to him.

In Jesus' time there was a recognized way to seek God's guidance in one's life. It was called "incubation" and it meant taking steps to clear one's mind and open one's heart to hearing any word from God. So Jesus follows the path: he withdraws into the wilderness, away from human society; he eats little or nothing; and he climbs up into the hill country to be more aware of God's presence around him. Then he prays, and he receives a series of visions. In the Gospels, these visions come from "the devil" or from "Satan." In Hebrew thought – shared by Jesus and his early followers – Satan was the "Accuser" or "Provoker," the one who nudged those seeking a way forward into a path that would not lead where they needed to go. These visions, then, are tests, or temptations: They each seem to be a way forward, and each one is a path Jesus might be drawn to, but each is a path he must reject.

Jesus' hunger suggests his first vision: turning stones to bread. Perhaps, as he sees rocks worn to smooth roundness in the seasonal watercourses of the hills, they momentarily appear to him as loaves of bread. But this is the first false path for him:

to attract people to follow him by offering food in abundance, in a society (like all those in the ancient world) in which ordinary people suffered from continual scarcity of food. Jesus can feed the hungry, but out of compassion, not as a bribe. So Jesus rejects this path: “Not by bread, but by God’s word, will people live.”

Jesus’ second vision – perhaps from his light-headedness because of hunger – is of himself leaping from the Temple height to bring about a miraculous rescue by God’s messengers, the angels. Such a miracle would be awe-inspiring indeed, and crowds would see it as they gathered in the Temple courts. But this too is a false path, that of overwhelming followers with a wondrous feat. Jesus rejects this as well: “You don’t test God’s care and love.”

His third vision – perhaps inspired by the view of the countryside from the heights, with the towns and villages laid out below – is of establishing a powerful, earthly rule, taking in all the inhabitants under the authority of kingdom or empire. Another false path, and another rejection: “We do not serve a human ruler, we serve God alone.”

Why turn from these paths? Because they compel people to follow you, while leaving them unchanged in their innermost being. You can bribe them with food; you can astonish them with supernatural power; you can rule them with might – but all of these leave their souls untouched, unconverted, unhealed.

So Jesus leaves the mountaintop, knowing not what he *will* do, but what he *must not* do. He awaits the sign to begin his calling. And then John the Baptist is arrested. Jesus goes out and begins with John’s call for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. He takes up where John has left off.

Next week we can try to understand how he is going to carry out this mission.

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Advent 3: Dec. 12, 2021

Advent is a season of waiting. But “waiting” can be very different when we are waiting in expectation, in hope and faith. There were times in Jesus’ life when he was waiting, especially when he was waiting to begin his ministry: waiting to understand what he was being called to do, waiting to learn how to do it, and waiting until the time was right for him to begin. Jesus grew into being “the Messiah,” and part of that growth meant that he had to wait. Jesus waited for God in his life, and so too we can wait in hope and faith.

Last week we saw that Jesus learned what he was *not* going to do in God’s mission. But what *was* he going to do? That was the challenge that faced him.

He began with the teaching of John the Baptist: repentance and forgiveness. But Jesus' ministry was going to involve much more, and soon he went out along the lake where the local fishermen worked and began to gather followers. Jesus must have had a compelling presence, because some people at least simply left what they were doing to join with him.

When his group grew to twelve, he started out with them on a walking tour of the country, going from place to place and speaking wherever people would listen. Such a journey is an excellent way for a group to form, and for its members to learn from its leader. Jesus never stayed long in one town or village: his followers would not come to know the people there, and instead they would come to depend increasingly on one another. Jesus was bringing them into a common fellowship, a critical step on their road to self-awareness and towards caring and looking out for others, not only for themselves. He then sent them out in pairs, again from place to place, to increase their mutual reliance.

Jesus also taught, and by two interesting methods. In the first, he told parables. "Parable" is from a Greek word, *parabolē*, meaning "place alongside," or "compare." This was a Jewish form of education: the *mashal*, a "proverb," is a comparison that forces you to think. (*Mashal* in Hebrew means "compare.") We say, "A stitch in time saves nine," but think about it: we are not really talking about sewing.

In the same way, Jesus' parables, which talk about one thing but intend something else, are designed to make you think. The "Prodigal Son" talks about someone running away from home, but it is not really about that. The "Good Samaritan" talks about a man being attacked on a journey, but it is not really a warning about dangerous, lonely stretches of road. Jesus tells his story and moves on. The listeners have to meditate, reflect, think – and maybe change their ways, or themselves.

Jesus' second teaching method was his miracles: his "wonders," his "acts of power," his "signs." You remember his vision in the wilderness, in which he sees that jumping from the Temple, being caught in mid-air, and thus being saved from death by God's angels, is not the way to go. But why? It'd be showing off, of course, but worse, *it'd be all about him*. Jesus' miracles are different: They are about other people, about *their* needs or sorrows, about their hunger, their illness, or their disabilities. They show Jesus using his ability for the sake of others, not for his own sake. He is telling his followers, "This is how you act. As best you can, help other people in their distress."

Jesus' ministry was teaching, and acting, to benefit and serve others, including us, to convert us into the kinds of people who will ourselves carry out this mission.

Next week, in preparation for Christmas, we'll look at the stories surrounding Jesus' birth, in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, to see what they might have to teach us.

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Advent 4: Dec. 19, 2021

Before Jesus was born, there were others waiting for their parts in his story. Mary, his mother, waited to give birth; Joseph, her husband, waited to see how he would keep her and the child safe. Shepherds waited for the dawn. Wise men, living in an ancient empire east and north of Judea, watched the heavens and waited for the signs they would find there. And rulers, priests, peasants, merchants, waited for their parts to begin.

Two Gospels recount events surrounding Jesus' birth: Matthew and Luke. In each case, the Gospel writer wants us to keep in mind Jesus' birth as a human being, but also this birth as an account of God's entry into our world, and into our lives. Matthew tells about the star and the "Wise Men from the East" who come to meet the newborn Jesus, bringing gifts in his honor. For the Jews of Matthew's day, and centuries before, "Wise Men from the East" would mean the Babylonian scholars who were the ancient world's best mathematicians and astronomers. They would be the ones who would notice something new in the starry skies and ponder what it might mean. Matthew also tells about King Herod's quest to find Jesus, and Herod's deadly efforts to get rid of this possible rival as the king of Israel.

Luke tells about the angels singing "Glory to God!", the shepherds, and the birth in the stable of an inn. At his birth Jesus is greeted by lowly laborers, field hands watching sheep, and by farm animals, at home in the stable. Luke also tells about Mary, Jesus' mother, and her struggle to know what to do about the task of bearing this child. And he tells about Mary and Joseph's arduous journey to Bethlehem in obedience to the emperor's command for a census of the population.

So each story about Jesus' birth is a story of praise and honor, but also difficulty and danger. It's almost as if to say to Jesus, "Welcome to our world!" And it is to say, "God comes among us – whether to wise scholars or farm laborers – in ways we might not understand right then."

But what else do these stories say?

Matthew is the Gospel writer who quotes the Hebrew Bible more than the others. Oddly enough, in the story of the Wise Men from the East, he doesn't do this; oddly, because in Isaiah the prophet we read this promise: "The nations [*goyim*, 'gentiles,' non-Jews] will come to your light, and kings to your dawn." But Matthew surely had this in mind. Jesus will be a savior for Jews and non-Jews alike, and people far and wide will come to follow him. The "light" in Isaiah's passage refers to the Torah, the teaching of God for the Jews, which all the world will see as light from God. But even before Isaiah uttered those words, Jeremiah had promised a "new covenant," a

Teaching that God would write on the hearts of the people, and in their innermost being. That is the light that will draw the nations together.

Luke's account shows the angels who come singing praise to God and peace on Earth, but who then leave the shepherds and return to their home with God. The shepherds, those lowly laborers, are the ones who greet the newborn child. Jesus may be announced by angels, but he will live his life among those, like the shepherds, who are poor, who labor and are heavily burdened.

So there we have it –the birth of the messiah, our Savior, and the entry of God into all our lives, in an animal pen and with both ancient scholars and hard-working shepherds to greet his birth. They greeted the newborn Jesus. Did Jesus, perhaps, grasp them by a finger?

For God grasps all of us by the hand– wise old men, laborers, commoners and kings, empresses and paupers. God meets us where we are, but, mercifully, God does not leave us where we are. Taking that hand means, perhaps, accepting God's lead in bringing us to someplace new, being led into becoming more like what we could be. The wise men and the shepherds would not know what meeting that newborn might mean for them. But we can know, if we wish to, what meeting Jesus might mean for us. We are meeting one whose life was self-giving compassion, who is God with us and for us, whose intention and desire is to love us into being better than we are.

And here we are, some two thousand years later, preparing to meet that baby once again.

Amen.