

Year A – Proper 16 “Christmas in August”

Merry Christmas!! Christmas Blessings to you!

No, I haven't gone off the deep end. I do know that this is August. But it's also true that I rarely get to talk about the meaning of Christmas with many of you, since you will likely be elsewhere for that great Festival.

And today's story about Moses gives me the opportunity to do that. Just as the Gospels contain the story of the essence of Christianity, the book of Exodus does that for the Jewish people. This is their founding story- their story of liberation from slavery, of being formed in the wilderness, receiving the covenant of law, and eventually ending up in the land they were promised where they settle and begin to build their culture and society amidst great opposition. Just as the events of the last week of Jesus' life form our understanding of what it is to be a people of God, this story formed Jesus own understanding of who the Father is and how the Father is manifest in the world.

Both of these foundational stories begin with the story of the birth of the one who lead the people into a new life in God. And today we heard Moses' story. He was born into a Hebrew family and because he was a boy and the Egyptians were afraid of the increasing population and strength of the Hebrew people, his life was in danger. His mother protects him for three months and then puts him in a basket in hopes that God will care for him. And that is the miracle of his birth – that he is found by the daughter of the Pharaoh, watched over by his sister and unbeknownst to the young woman, reunited with his mother for several years. He then is returned to the court where he will assume his influence and power as a grandson. Just as the hand of God is involved in Jesus birth, so it is in the birth of Moses who goes on to lead his people.

For Christians, Jesus' birth narrative is different, of course. Because we came to understand who Jesus was differently from the common Jewish understanding, the story focuses on the miracle of the birth itself and the wonders that occur all around that event.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is named the Messiah by Peter and Jesus affirms him for that pronouncement.

The concept of the messiah seems to have developed in later Judaism. The Torah (books of Moses) contains no specific reference to him, though some Jewish scholars have pointed out that it does speak of the "End of Days," which is the time of the messiah.

The larger Jewish Bible (beyond the first five books) gives several specifications as to who the messiah will be. He will be a descendent of King David (2 Samuel 7:12-13; Jeremiah 23:5), observant of Jewish law (Isaiah 11:2-5), a righteous judge (Jeremiah 33:15), and a great military leader.

Jews do not believe that the messiah will be divine. A fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity is the Jewish conviction that God is so essentially different from and beyond humanity that he could never become a human.

Christians began to think of the Messiah in a different way after Jesus death, resurrection and ascension. Because of people's experience of the divine life in Jesus, there was a new understanding that a new covenant with God had begun. And that, in fact, Divine life through intimacy with God (the Father) was not only possible but, as Jesus taught, was already happening.

On Christmas, we celebrate what we call the Incarnation, the Word of God manifest in a human. It begins with a baby.

But both of these “Christmas stories” are about much more than children. For Christians they are about the life and presence of God that is being born in us. At one of the baptisms we had this summer I talked to the children about the new name that is given to each of us upon our baptism. That name is Christ – from Christos,

the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for Messiah. At Baptism we become pregnant with Christ. And as we grow in our faith and understanding, the Christ Child in us grows too. Jesus tells us that we need to begin as a child in order to grow into the full stature of Christ. Our baptismal vocation is to become more and more like him, manifesting the reconciling presence (the kingdom) of God in our lives and the world.

That child of the living God within all of us needs the kind of protection and watching over that Moses had. And we can do that for each other.

You may have heard the story of the old monastery outside of a German town that had fallen on hard times. Their financial resources were dwindling, the buildings were beginning to crumble. The old monks were getting older and no new younger monks were coming to join them. Their future looked dismal and they had no idea of what to do other than pray and they were doing lots of that!

Not far from the monastery in the midst of the woods stood a hermits' hut that was visited occasionally by a well-known rabbi, who would come for retreat. The Father Superior of the monastery heard that the rabbi was in his hut and he decided one day to take a walk and visit him. The rabbi welcomed him, offered him a cup of tea and they sat in front of the wood stove in silence. Slowly the monk began to tell of his woes and the rabbi listened. When the story had all been poured out, they sat in silence again, sipping their tea. Finally the rabbi spoke. "One of you is the Messiah", he said. The monk looked at him and the rabbi said nothing more, just rose from his seat and escorted the monk to the door. He gave him a hug and blessed him.

The monk pondered the words of the rabbi all the way back to the monastery. Who could it be? Who was the Messiah among them? He thought of John who cleaned everything and kept their spaces as spotless as possible. He thought of George who cooked, or David who planned their worship, and so on.

When he returned to the monastery, the Superior called all of the brothers together in and shared the details of his visit with the rabbi. And all of the brothers began to wonder, "Who is the Messiah among us?" They began to treat each other differently, anticipating that each might be the one. And before long the atmosphere in the monastery changed. It was as if a fresh wind had blown through and blown out the cobwebs, and opened the windows so that the light of the monastic life could shine through the walls. People from the town came to make retreats. Young men showed up to explore their possible vocation. Money was provided to repair the buildings and pay expenses. The monastery flourished again.

Who is the Messiah among us? Let Christ be born in you.

Christmas Blessings now and always. Amen.

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