

*“The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Messiahs”*

*Isaiah 11.1–10 and Matthew 3.1–12*

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Isaiah is just full of hints about Jesus, right? Many Christians regard this text as a prophecy about Jesus’ coming, but Jews certainly don’t read it this way, since they are still waiting for *meshiach* – the anointed one from the lineage of Jesse. (That alone illustrates the patriarchy of the period in which Isaiah was writing.) Whether you take Isaiah’s prophecy as a reference to Jesus or whether you think that it provided a nice script for the gospel writers to follow, it’s still useful to examine what people at that time were expecting of a messiah, and how that may have shaped our own expectations today.

Advent is a good time to look at the Jesus we’ve come to know and love and to ask ourselves where our images and assumptions of Jesus came from, and to pose the question: “What kind of messiah are we expecting today?” What are the characteristics you attribute to Jesus? What are **your** assumptions about who Jesus the man was and possibly who the risen Christ is today? Is he just the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger? Is he the radical preacher who upset the status quo? Is he the healer who touched the untouchables? Is he seated at the right hand of God? (Think about that a little, and we’ll come back to it later.)

For now, let’s take a look at Isaiah’s prophecy about (with apologies to Steven Covey) the Seven Habits of Highly Effective Messiahs. First, let’s talk about the position from which Isaiah was writing. The first part of the book, in which we find today’s text is by Isaiah of Jerusalem, who wrote about 700 years before the birth of Jesus, more than 100 years before the Babylonian exile and the writings of second and third Isaiah.

According to Isaiah, an effective messiah will:

1. be anointed by the spirit of the Lord; (*Meshiach* is the Hebrew word for “anointed.”)
2. possess wisdom and understanding.
3. exercise counsel and power.
4. have a deep sense of reverence for God.
5. will use distributive justice to deal with the poor and defend the humble (*and strike the ruthless*).
6. wear the belt of justice
7. oversee a world marked by peace between those we “naturally” assume to be enemies

What is the overall picture you get? Is the messiah to be more of a conqueror or a liberator? A military leader or a peacemaker? Someone who acts on unthinking impulse or is wise and judicious? Some of what we expect in a messiah has to do with the situation in which we find ourselves.

In the first century, at the time of Jesus’ birth, people in the Judea were expecting the messiah to be a military leader – a generalissimo who would boot Rome out and restore the Jewish homeland to Jewish rule. That might have been what they thought they needed, but it isn’t what they got.

So, what can we really know about Jesus the person? Here are seven things:

1. He lived in the first century in the region around the Sea of Galilee.
2. He was an observant Jew and had a deep, personal relationship with God.
3. He was a disciple or a colleague of John the Baptizer, and therefore part of a Jewish sect opposed to the Sadducees, Pharisees, and also the Roman imperial occupation.

4. He was a healer.
5. He was a sage, who proposed an alternative form of wisdom in which the first would be last and the last would be first.
6. He was an edgy, controversial radical who was executed by the Romans because of his nonviolent opposition to the empire, and therefore a subversive.
7. He proclaimed the kingdom of God: a vision of how the world would be if God were directly and immediately in charge. And for the Empire, that was a very controversial message.

In 325, as Christianity was being embraced as the official religion of the Roman Empire, bishops met at the Council of Nicaea to determine the orthodox views of Jesus. One of their main points was to oppose a bishop named Arius, who saw Jesus not as equivalent to God the creator, but rather as a pre-existent being created by God and as a prophet and as a man. And it was at this council in 325 that the idea of the Trinity (three equal aspects of God, all of one substance) was enunciated. The council should be seen in light of the fact that the bishops were gathered at the rather strong invitation of the Emperor Constantine, who wanted to have theological matters tied up in a neat, little package to end all the squabbling among the churches...*It didn't really work, did it?*

It begs us to ask ourselves Jesus' own question, handed down to us by the writers of the three synoptic gospels: "Who do you say that I am?"

We've heard the voice of the prophet Isaiah and who he said the messiah *would* be; and the voice of 1st century messianic expectation and who they thought the messiah *should* be; and the voice of the post-resurrection community and who they thought Jesus *was*; and the orthodox views of the Council of Nicaea and who they thought Jesus *continued to be*. But, we haven't heard from you: ***Who do you say that Jesus was and the risen Christ is?***

So, moving along with our Steven Covey paradigm, what would the Seven Habits of a Highly Effective Messiah look like today? What characteristics do you imagine being on the list?

Maybe you don't expect a miracle-worker who walks on the water and exorcizes demons. Perhaps you don't see a messiah who is fully human and fully divine, though that mystery, that paradox, is pretty post-modern sounding. Where do you think Jesus would be if he was an itinerant teacher today? Would he be in Beverly Hills or Harlem, visiting the prison or the country club, in the churches or in the synagogues?

For me, the best yardstick in answering these questions is to look at the scriptural record of the historical Jesus and what we can know with some degree of certainty about Jesus. But, I'd ask you to let your imagination run wild for a minute. (If you'd like to close your eyes for a moment and meditate on this, that's fine.) If Jesus were alive today, what kinds of things would he saying? Where would he be speaking? How would he reach people today? Who would he be trying to reach? Would the things he was saying be controversial or would he not make waves? And with all of these elements, ask yourself: what do I need Jesus to be in the world today? What circumstances do I need Jesus to be involved with and influence?

And as you are ready, come back. I wonder what you are thinking about. I'm really curious about the things you imagine Jesus saying and doing. So, I'd like to open this up for a couple of minutes and ask you to volunteer one of the ideas that occurred to you. What *are* the Seven Habit of a Highly Effective Messiah?

[time for dialogue]

Thanks to those of you who shared your thoughts, and thanks to you all for stretching your imaginations a bit. Advent is a time of anticipation and expectation, and I'd ask you to pay attention to what came up for you this morning, and to keep your eye on that during our Advent journey – even when you're in long lines at the grocery or hurrying to get decorations prepared for Christmas or running the gauntlet at the mall. There is a reason for these weeks: not to feel overwhelmed by all we have to do, but rather to envision and prepare the way for the coming of the Christ into our lives once again.

I don't want to cop out and not tell you what I was thinking about who Jesus is today, so I'll leave you with three simple, controversial sentences: Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we. God is still speaking.

Amen.