

During one year at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, I participated in a number of interreligious offerings around the city. One of the gatherings was held on a Friday evening at a synagogue around the corner from where I lived. A scholar was presenting on something that has long been lost from my memory. However, what I do remember is the conversation over a light Shabbat meal with a professor from the University of Minnesota. Upon learning that I was studying to be a pastor, he asked a very simple question. “We (Jews) believe that when the Messiah comes, there will be peace in the world.” He continued, “You (Christians) believe that the Messiah has come.” He concluded, “Why, then, is there no peace?”

It was a fabulously crafted question and left little wiggle room. I could talk about the fact that Christians were waiting for the second coming of the Messiah, while the Jews were waiting for the first coming of the Messiah. In essence, this waiting is the thing that unified us. No need to get into particulars about why there was no peace, even though Christians thought the Messiah had already come. That response, you may surmise, did not suffice for the professor nor for me. Thus, began for me what has continued to be a fascination with this concept that we bandy about rather nonchalantly at best or thoughtlessly at worst.

I mean it’s kind of a no-brainer, right? *Everybody* knows what and who the *Messiah* is! Or do they?

As the professor’s question to me pointed out, there are distinctions between Jewish and Christian understandings of Messiah, and you may as well include the Muslim tradition in the mix as well, for they share the concept as well. We say, “Of course, Jesus *is* the Messiah. The Christ. The Son of God.” Yet, how do we know this to be true? Furthermore, if we borrow from the expectations for the Messiah of the early Jewish community, we might be a bit confused as to how Jesus became that figure for all of Christendom.

Along with the expectation of world peace, the early Jewish community also believed that Israel would be brought back to the height of earthly power that they enjoyed under King David. Indeed, the effort on the part of some of the gospel writers to connect Jesus to David is to give him some Messianic props. Yet, if you subscribe to this notion of Messiah, you understand how strange Jesus looked as a first century Messiah. He did not bring peace. Indeed, the world continued to roll along in its violence and vice. He did not restore Israel to earthly power. Rather, he was mocked and scourged by the power of that day--Rome--and given the ultimate punishment for treason: Crucifixion.

Thus, the early Church quickly began a reinterpretation of what the Messiah truly was to be. Instead of immediate peace, Jesus the Messiah ushered in the Kingdom of God into our midst. Not in one fell swoop did all things become whole, but in the cracks of life, the fullness of God

might be glimpsed and the grace of God was taking hold. It would only be a matter of time before God's fullness and grace would win out. Because that day still remains elusive, the season of Advent is the time that we share with our Jewish brothers and sisters regarding the hoping and dreaming for God to restore all things and be in all things.

Furthermore, the powerlessness and suffering of Jesus became the lens to see the fullness of God on display for us. Dominance and strength became less indicative of the presence of Messiah, and the idea of God with us in the midst of our suffering became the predominant way of understanding the Messiah. Not God beyond us; rather God in our midst. It goes without saying that when earthly power aligned itself with the Christian tradition starting in the 4th century, we forgot about this idea of Messiah, and we, as a tradition, became more enamored with power and rules and right and might. However, the suffering of the Jewish people over time (tragically and often at the hands of Christians) and particularly in the Holocaust, forced the Church to re-evaluate its understanding of Messiah and our relationship with Judaism. This has been long overdue.

Which is why I invite you to join with our brothers and sisters at Temple Beth-El this coming Friday, December 8, at 7:30 PM and on Sunday, December 10, at 10:00 AM, to hear more about the Jewish and Christian understandings of the Messiah. I think that it will enrich your faith, and it will certainly raise good questions as we both anticipate and long for the wholeness of God to be made known to us. As we say: Amen. Come Lord Jesus.