
Is John the Messiah?

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**

This Sunday, our gospel lesson presents a curious conclusion to our Christmas festivities. Surely we have enjoyed the five or six weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, replete with dinners and families, full of football and fun. This season covers several themes: national thanksgiving, retail sales, office parties, family gatherings, grand Christmas services, long New Year's Eve parties and earnest resolutions; yet the whole scheme can be perceived as one long, often frenetic, holiday.

So, I rather like it when John the Baptist returns to church on the Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany, you recall, January 6, marks the arrival of the three kings, and the general conclusion to our Christmas season. (We heard the story of the magi on both the Second Sunday after Christmas this year and on Epiphany itself.)

We last heard John the Baptist on the Second and Third Sundays of Advent, right before Christmas, full of energy and anxiety; indeed, John the Baptist attacks our Advent with the same anxiety that many of us are consuming in Advent. We consume anxiety in Advent, finding the right gifts, attending the parties, scurrying from here to there. Our preparation for Christmas often leaves us exhausted for the actual glorious twelve days of Christmas.

Now, on the Sunday after Epiphany, according to our assigned gospel lessons, Jesus has grown up in a hurry. He is now around thirty years old, and he is presenting himself for baptism. It is a sudden jump for those of us following the maturity of Jesus in the scriptures. The Bible speaks of only one incident between Jesus's presentation in the temple as an infant, and his presentation for baptism when he was around thirty years old (the single story we have of Jesus in the intervening years is his time in the temple, lost from his parents, at twelve years old).

Jesus presents himself for baptism before this same figure whom we heard four weeks ago, railing against sin in the wilderness. "Prepare the way of the Lord," John the Baptist shouts. John the Baptist is so dramatic, even charismatic, that people wonder if he is actually the messiah. Luke 3 claims that "As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming,"

John the Baptist is not the Messiah. The anxiety of earnest preparation is not the Messiah. The parties and sales, the consumption and revelry, are not the Messiah. The Messiah is now, during this season of Epiphany, as we try to live through what it means for the Word to be flesh.

Yes, we marveled at an infant, just as we love to ogle over most newborn babies. But we often have a hard time looking at those same human beings a few years later! This baptism of Jesus (as an adult, you recall) means that we look at the Messiah in a different way. A Messiah is not simply an innocent child, nor is the Messiah the local firebrand preacher. The Messiah is this steady and sure Jesus, going about his life healing and teaching. He will teach with a startling wisdom, and he will love with a pleasing depth. The Messiah will be someone who lives with us during the ordinary parts of our lives, not just during the anxious seasons.

May God be with us during the season of Epiphany, when we learn to see the Word in the flesh of those around us, the grown-ups, the teen-agers, those in need of healing and teaching, our own family members. "O God, in the mystery of the

Word made flesh, you have caused a new light to shine in our hearts, to give the knowledge of your glory in the face of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord." (from the Proper Preface for Epiphany, *Book of Common Prayer*, page 378).

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