

***Jesus: God's Anointed One***  
Luke 1:26-38

According to an account in *The New York times*, it was just before Christmas several years ago that David Storch, a music teacher, borrowed a copy of the score of Handel's *Messiah* from the Brooklyn Public Library. Through a clerical error, however, the transaction was not recorded. There were several other requests for the score, and the library staff, unaware that it had been checked out, spent many hours searching in vain for it through the stacks. On the day that Storch returned it, placing it on the circulation desk, he was astonished to hear the librarian spontaneously, joyously, and loudly shout, "The *Messiah* is here! The *Messiah* is back!" Every head in the library turned toward the voice, but, alas, as the *Times* reported, "A few minutes later everyone went back to work."<sup>1</sup>

Like the librarians, certain Jews in Jesus' day longed for the return of the Messiah! Jews in Israel were living in oppressive conditions under the Roman Empire. They were weary of social injustice, foreign domination, and colonial exploitation. They yearned for a different way of living. Their longing took them back in their history to the "good old days" of King David, when the way of the world seemed more compatible with the will of God. Out of their nostalgia, they began to hope that a king like David would be sent by God to intervene in their miserable circumstances and deliver them from bondage.

This longing for a ruler like David was not new. It was an idea that had given the Jewish people hope during the eighth century before the Christian era. The prophets, especially Isaiah, renewed hope for exiles in a foreign country by kindling the anticipation of a restored nation under a ruler like David. The king to come would lead the people to freedom and liberate them from foreign rule. He would restore confidence and worth to a people battered by oppression. He would establish God's rule on earth with a peace that could never again be shattered. The word *messiah* is not mentioned in these texts, but messianic ideas are nonetheless present.

The Hebrew word *Messiah* means "the anointed one." The comparable word in Greek, *Christos*, is translated as Christ. Both words Messiah and Christ, refer to an anointed person. The word *Messiah* is used sparsely and inconsistently in Jewish literature before the time of Jesus. The word is never used in the Old Testament of a future ruler or deliverer. When *Messiah* does appear in the Hebrew Scriptures, it designates David kings, past and present, as "anointed ones." Priests and prophets are also called "anointed."

In the Old Testament a person set apart for divine service was anointed with oil. Oil makes one's face shine – beaming with the light of God. Oil has a pleasant scent – drawing others toward the fragrance of God. Oil offers living energy drawn from the sunshine and the earth. Oil refreshes the exhausted, heals the sick, cools fever, and soothes pain. Oil smoothes whatever is rough and harsh. Anointing with oil fills one with the fragrance of divine love.

Luke declares that the hope for a Davidic descendant to bring peace and justice is fulfilled in Jesus. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus “will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.”

The Bible does not report Jesus being anointed with oil at the beginning of his ministry, but he is nonetheless regarded as the Anointed One. At his baptism he is anointed by the Holy Spirit and God affirms, “You are my Son.” In his inaugural sermon at Nazareth, he claims the prophetic words of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me” (Luke 4:18 citing Isaiah 61:2). Jesus is anointed and empowered by the Spirit of God. Later before his death, a woman does anoint his feet with oil. This precious act testifies that Jesus does indeed offer the fragrance of divine love. Jesus is God's Anointed One, soothing people's broken hearts and demonstrating the liberating activity of God. In Jesus' person and ministry, the hope for a Kingdom built on peace and justice begins to be fulfilled. Jesus is an agent of God who exercises God's rule in history, not only for Israel, but for all nations and peoples.

Jesus is not the only one anointed by God in this story. Mary is also set apart by God for a special mission. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary with the blessing, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!...The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”

She is anointed by the Spirit of God and invited to participate in God's work. God chooses Mary and asks her to take part in an event which makes little sense, but which will change the course of human history. Neither Mary nor Jesus, of a peasant family, are who we would expect to be chosen as God's partners and representatives. But it is exactly these of lowly, humble means whom God chooses, anoints, and empowers. God makes out of nothing, something; God takes nobody and makes them somebody. It is this divine power of transformation that makes prophets and saints of ordinary people.

Mary is initially perplexed by God's choice of her, but with assurance, she accepts the mission given her. She offers herself in obedience to God's service: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary chose to allow God to do marvelous things through her. Her part was to consent to dance with God as God leads and directs.

To believe is to "give one's heart to God." Mary's assent was born of years of learning and living the faith of her people. Mary gave her heart to God and joyfully offered her life to God's service. With this anointing by God's messenger, Mary truly knew, "I matter, I really matter. I know now that I am an irreplaceable individual."

Before Mary, they only anointed kings, priests, and prophets. But after Mary, after the church was founded, they anointed ordinary people upon their baptism, with oil on their forehead or the laying on of hands. The church began baptizing and anointing babies who were beginning the journey of life, to say, "You are irreplaceable; you matter in the eyes of God."

Mary was every bit as ordinary, every bit as imperfect, every bit as off balance as any of us are. And because God chose to call and anoint her for a sacred mission, God calls us as well. God chooses to anoint us for the mission of building a community shaped by God's design and for God's purpose. God desires human collaboration in the completion of creation. Like Mary, even like Jesus, you are called, chosen, and anointed by God to participate in the work of God.

A little girl was standing with her grandfather by an old-fashioned open well. They had just lowered a bucket to draw some water to drink. "Grandfather," asked the little girl, "where does God live?" The old man lifted the little girl and held her over the open well. "Look down into the water," he said, "and tell me what you see." "I see myself," said the little girl. "That's where God lives," said the grandfather. "God lives in you."

Christmas reminds us that God lives in Jesus, that God lives in Mary, and that God lives in you. Each and every one of us, as brothers and sisters of Jesus, are chosen to be anointed by God, to be filled with the Spirit of God, to radiate the fragrance of God's love. In Christ, the Messiah, God's Anointed One, God declares that you are precious. Everybody is valuable, no matter what your status in this world, no matter who you are. You are irreplaceable; you matter in the eyes of God.

Thanks be to God!

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, "Moses and Aaron," as translated in Karl H. Worner, *Schoenberg's "Moses and Aaron"* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), pp. 137 & 163. Quoted by Thomas G. Long, *Something Is About to Happen...* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing, 1987), p. 50.

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