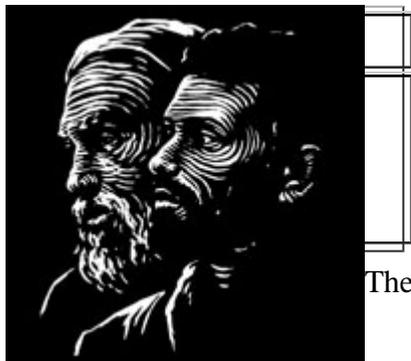


## An unexpected messiah

Roger Karban | Dec. 15, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

The late scripture scholar Sulpician Fr. Raymond Brown frequently raised eyebrows when he said, "There are no predictions of Jesus, as we know him, anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures."

I was taught the opposite. The Hebrew Scriptures, especially the prophets, were presented as a gold mine of predictions, each eventually zeroing in on Jesus of Nazareth. As far back as Adam and Eve, all Jews began expecting a messiah: someone who would save them from their sins, a divine person who would inaugurate a new age in which the entire world would be transformed. When he arrives, there will be no more pain, no more death, no more tears. We need only dig out the biblical predictions about this unique person, look at Jesus, and bingo! He's the one.



The main problem with this kind of messiah/Jesus theology is that there's no one

picture of the messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures. Each time and place created its own image, someone who would save them from the difficulties they were facing right then and there. During Jesus' lifetime, for instance, Jews living at the Dead Sea settlement of Qumran had a different idea of messiah than Jews in downtown Jerusalem.

We simply can't ask, "Did Jesus fulfill the Jewish prediction of messiah?" There was no one set of predictions. And, as we saw back on Palm Sunday, the Gospel Jesus rejected the current idea of messiah shared by most of his fellow Jews -- a liberator from Roman occupation -- by entering Jerusalem on a donkey instead of a horse. Even more significant, almost always when someone in the crowd labels him with a messianic title, he tells them to keep quiet. This Galilean carpenter seems to have had big problems fulfilling his people's messianic expectations, expectations that constantly changed.

These expectations become even more complicated if one throws in the idea of the "Day of Yahweh." When things were really going south, some faithful Jews began to hope that Yahweh, "God's self," would personally come down from heaven on a specific day, take up residence in the Promised Land and straighten out the mess. At this point, Yahweh was no longer going to send a messiah; God would operate as a hands-on God, the thrust of our Zephaniah reading.

Though we Christians presume Jesus is Yahweh, no author of the Hebrew Scriptures ever thought the messiah would be God. Combining the two in one person went far beyond anything anyone could have expected. Jesus of Nazareth is totally unique.

If we insist on calling Jesus messiah, we must appreciate that the historical Jesus gave a whole new definition to that title, a definition not found in the Hebrew Scriptures. This means that, instead of simply reading a messianic prediction and applying it to Jesus, his first followers had to go through a constant process of discovery.

Of course, his resurrection began their discovery. Once they realized Jesus had become, in Paul's words, a "new creation," they started to look at things in his earthly ministry from a different direction. His birth, and the events leading up to it, took on new meaning. Though he had once been a disciple of John the Baptizer, his followers now began to regard John as his precursor. Jesus' resurrection forced a total reevaluation of him, his words and actions, even his relationships.

Their discovery is behind today's "rejoice" theme.

Though at this point in his faith journey Paul still expects an imminent Parousia, he encourages his Philippian Christians to rejoice in what's here right now, even before Jesus' second coming. "Have no anxiety," he writes. "The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Just as Jesus' earliest followers didn't immediately recognize his importance, much less his divinity, I presume many of us don't recognize the risen Jesus at work in all we are and do.

When I pray to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, I'm basically praying to someone whose image I create in my mind. I can conjure up any image I desire. But when I pray to the risen Jesus present in the people around me, I'm on the hook. I'm forced to deal with what I've got -- the men and women, children and adults, sick and healthy, straight and gay, acceptable and unacceptable individuals who populate my world -- a very unpredictable lot.

Like our sacred authors, our faith lives are rooted in a constant quest to discover God in the unpredicted and unexpected. If we're not experiencing that process, we really don't have a lot to rejoice about.

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