

When you get down to it, the word Messiah is not an easy one to grapple with. It's so pervasive in church-speak that we might not even think about it too much. We know that it's Jesus' title. We have some sense that it connects to Jesus as savior.

But to really get at this story, it can be helpful to understand a bit more about its background. What did Messiah mean to those first century Jewish people?

The definition of Messiah in Hebrew is "God's anointed" or "God's chosen ruler."

You've probably read enough of the prophets and heard enough sermons on the prophets to know that they spoke of a promised Messiah.

But the prophets don't completely clarify what or who this Messiah will be. That he'll be a descendant of David seems pretty consistent. But what kind of Messiah should the people look for? That's where it gets less clear. And there was probably no single idea among Jews about what it meant.

In Isaiah, Messiah might be connected to the suffering servant, although the Jews typically connected that figure to themselves. In other prophetic writings, including Isaiah, Messiah is a humble king who will bring peace. Or he will be Israel's liberator – a mighty soldier/king who defeats Israel's enemies. In some of the prophets' writings, it seems that the Messiah may even actually be God.

The prophets also talk about one who will come before Messiah and prepare the way. It's generally accepted by Christians now that that was John the Baptizer.

But, apparently some in Israel believed Jesus might be that one. They must have missed John's father Zechariah sing about his own son as that voice in the wilderness, crying prepare the way.

The confusion about just who Jesus is is reflected in this story. Jesus has created a buzz, for sure. People are talking. And perhaps some have begun to wonder, could this charismatic teacher actually be Messiah? Peter was clear though. Yes, Jesus was the Messiah – the one sent from God to rule.

What was less clear to him – and virtually everyone – was just what kind of Messiah Jesus was.

Jesus is the fulfillment of all the messianic prophecies...but not really in a way anyone expected. He did become the suffering servant. And he did proclaim a new kingdom – a kingdom ruled by God's way of peace and love. That kingdom broke in with Jesus' incarnation, but we still await its final fulfillment.

The Messianic prophecy that said Messiah would be a mighty king who defeats Israel's enemies certainly didn't seem to be fulfilled in Jesus' time. And honestly, that's probably the one many in Israel held on to tightest.

They wanted a Messiah who would mount an army and stage a great battle to defeat Israel's enemies and restore the nation.

The promise that Messiah will defeat the enemies of God's people still stands. But it doesn't mean what people thought it would.

Its meaning shifted to the end of the age and to a much more cosmic scope – when all the enemies of God's creation are defeated.

What also changed with Jesus' death and resurrection is an understanding of just who and what those enemies are, and how they're actually defeated.

Which brings us back to the question for today – if we say Jesus is the Messiah, then just what sort of Messiah is he?

Jesus answers the question. He tells his disciples what kind of Messiah he is right after Peter answers him. He says Messiah will suffer and die and be raised in three days.

You might be wondering what happened to Peter's response – the one where he rebukes Jesus and says no, Lord this must never happen and Jesus says get behind me Satan. It's not in Luke's version.

We really get no idea from Luke's version what Peter's reaction was.

See, Luke is less interested in recording Peter's response...and more interested in having his readers ponder what Jesus said for themselves.

Today, that's us. Christians today I think are pretty comfortable with accepting that Jesus is the Messiah promised by the prophets. We are also pretty clear that Jesus is God – that's what belief in a triune God means, among other things.

But the question stands - what kind of Messiah do we believe Jesus is? If Messiah means one chosen by God to rule, how do we believe that rule is established?

We have to be honest with ourselves - If Jesus is God's chosen one, sent to save us and rule over all the earth, how do we want that to happen? Does it mesh with what Jesus said?

Jesus' answer is that it's through his suffering and death. Ultimately of course it's through his resurrection, too. But we don't get there without the suffering.

There's a thread of Christianity in our nation that is still very much in the camp that the rule of Jesus should be established by political means...and if that fails, perhaps even by violence. Some think Christians should rule with power and dominance.

But that simply doesn't fit with what Jesus said here. He didn't dominate and he didn't use violence. He went, humbly, to his execution by the state. That becomes the model for us...it becomes the model for how Jesus' rule is established.

In fact, it becomes the model for what Jesus' rule looks like – not a rule of power or force, but a rule of humility and love. And that rule will be established through the sacrifice and even suffering of those who are joined to Christ in his death and resurrection...us.

It's when Jesus followers lay down their own need for glory and power...when they too walk humbly in the self-giving path Jesus walked...that's how Jesus' rule is established.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King, Jr. day. All the civil rights for the oppressed that have been won in our country have largely been won, not by power over or by violence, but by those willing to lay down even their lives so that God's beloved community might become reality.

We may or may not be called to such sacrifice. But at a minimum, we live in a time when we as Christians need to fully enter into the question, what kind of Messiah is Jesus?

What does it mean for me...in my little world...to take up my cross?

Cross-bearing as Jesus talks about here is not the bad stuff that happens to us...the things that make us suffer. It's voluntarily taking up a cross in self-giving and even self-sacrificing love

What might I be asked to give up for the sake of God's beloved community?

Jesus' question to the disciples began after a time of prayer. The prayer life of Jesus is very important in Luke's gospel. All his big moments – launching his ministry, choosing his disciples, and so on – happen after he's spent time in prayer.

We too are called to ponder Jesus' question to us – who do you say that I am? And what kind of Messiah am I? We are called to ponder what taking up our cross will look like in this time and place.

It is more important than ever for Christians to pray. To pray, like Jesus, thy will not mine. To meditate and soak in God's presence. To let God speak to us. To pray for God to give us the courage to follow in the Jesus way of taking up a cross rather than trying to dominate.

We do proclaim Jesus as ruler of heaven and earth. But we also proclaim that rule was established through a cross...and that makes all the difference.