

The crying Messiah (Matthew 3:1-12)

John is thinking about Jesus arriving as an adult, not a baby.

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In a few weeks, we will celebrate the arrival of the Christ child. The popular Christmas carol suggests he makes no cries while away and awake in a manger.

I imagine the writer was focusing on Jesus' full divinity and was building upon clichés of what it means to be “the perfect child.” But let's be honest (and theologically sound). Jesus is also fully human, and crying is a part of human life. In fact, it is a good thing to hear babies crying. It gives us a clue that they need something. A vulnerable crying baby in need—that's the Messiah we are waiting for.

Thinking about Jesus' arrival as a crying baby becomes even more surprising when considering the words of John the Baptist, as he seeks to prepare people for the arrival of the Messiah. In the Gospel passage for this week, John warns that Jesus is coming to clear the threshing floor in a whirl of righteous violence. Sometimes a baby's piercing scream can be quite violent on an eardrum, but that's a bit different from what John is talking about. He is warning of a Messiah who is coming to take a public place of authority, whip the people of God into shape, and weed out anyone who is not on board.

Even as John rightly points people to Jesus and the kingdom of heaven, he seems to have some misguided expectations about how Jesus will establish authority and live in the world.

Ultimately, John is thinking about the Messiah arriving as an adult, not a baby. And at this point in Matthew's narrative, he has not encountered any challenge to his assumptions about how the Messiah will bring about righteousness and justice.

However, we present-day readers get to prepare for the Messiah's arrival with the awareness of Matthew's whole Gospel narrative. We know that Jesus teaches us to pray in ways that trade violence for forgiveness. We know that as much as Jesus is concerned with living rightly, he embodies a compassionate and wide invitation. Even more, we know that the Messiah arrives into this world in a vulnerable way that reveals insight about how God often works in the world.

So, while it is important to pay attention to what John is saying at the Jordan River there in the wilderness, let's place it alongside what we know about Jesus. For when the Messiah arrives, the first things he will do is cry and reach out to be held.