

To the Moon and Back  
Matthew 22:34-46  
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When I was a wee lad, I played with dolls. Raggedy Ann and Andy.  
Probably even Barbie and Ken, that kind of thing. I never had a GI Joe,



thanks be to my mother, but I may  
have had the next best thing. Behold  
Johnny West, his good wife Jane, and  
his faithful horse Thunderbolt. Oh,  
and last but not least, Geronimo, who  
we weren't sure was friend or foe,

but who had much cooler accessories than Johnny West, as you can see. You  
probably had these “action figures” or some variation of them in your youth,  
heroes through which you could exercise  
your imagination and act out your  
childhood fantasies. But of course, to a  
child, they are more than just heroes. They  
are the embodiment of the thing they look  
like. My Geronimo action figure was just  
about as stereotypical as it could be, and



part of a collection of images that shaped who I thought Native Americans were, and what they did. These images were not always very accurate, as my mother later told me. Apparently, when I was a small boy on vacation with my family in the Western United States, we stopped for lunch at a restaurant that was near the site of a large forest fire. And at this restaurant were some of the fire fighters battling the blaze, including one Native American man eating his lunch at a table near us. Apparently, I had missed a few lessons about politeness, because in a voice loud enough for this fellow to hear me, I asked my parents, “When is he going to go woo-woo?” Native Americans everywhere are grateful I have grown up a little.

I suspect action figures are common in every culture in one form or another, probably even in Jesus' time. Perhaps Jesus even had his own



David and Goliath action figures, like these, or maybe a Moses and Pharaoh set with which he reenacted the Exodus. But even if they weren't part of his toy collection, it safe to say that Jesus and his generation grew up hearing stories of the good

old days, of the heroes of their faith. I have a hunch however, that the stories weren't as sanitized as the ones we tell children today, and so my guess is that Jesus, and the same Pharisees who came to him to ask him about the



Law, grew up with mental images more like this one of King David, which would have made for a nice background to the

PowerPoint if it wouldn't have traumatized our children tonight. And the stories they heard wouldn't have stopped with Goliath, but would have included all his mighty and violent exploits, the ones that had made him

legend. And of course, there were all those Psalms too that helped keep his memory and legend alive, Psalms like number 110 which we just heard.

It is that very psalm that Jesus uses to stump his opponents, and to tell them to put away their toys and grow up. It's a psalm that was apparently quite popular in Jesus' time, a psalm which described the perfect king, probably David himself, but probably also the king everyone hoped for, the Messiah, the one who would liberate Israel from its captivity and bring back the glory years. You see, King David had, through the years, taken on mythic proportions. He wasn't perfect, everyone knew that, but he was perfect enough to be the model, and of course there was that promise that went along with him, that there would always be a son of David on Israel's throne, and just because that hadn't been true for quite some time, hundreds of years actually, didn't mean the promise wasn't still valid. It was just a promise deferred. And so we hear coming from the lips of the citizens of Jerusalem, "Hosanna to the son of David" as Jesus enters into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. And Matthew recognizes how important that link is, as he traces Jesus' genealogy back through King David. He was an important inspiration in tough times, a hero to look up to.

But here's the problem with all that hero worship. For as big as the myth of David had made the Messiah, it had really just reduced the Messiah

to a caricature of what God had in mind for the savior of the world. Yes, in a sense, King David, or at least his myth, had become an idol of the real thing. Israel's eleventh century golden boy had become its first century golden calf. A few Sundays ago, I shared about how an idol is not so much another god, but rather a hand made object that was thought to contain enough of a deity that it could be worshiped as if it were the deity, and that the problem with that where the God of Israel was concerned is that no simple object could ever capture the essence of, much less speak any truth about, the creator of the universe. Well, even though there probably weren't little action figures of King David for sale in the marketplace, his myth served the same purpose: to take the power of the real messiah and make it portable and manageable, and all too much like everyone's fantasy. Yes, this idol of the messiah kicked some butt in the world, like we heard in Psalm 110, but is that what God really had in mind for a Messiah? Or was it just wishful thinking? You see, the messiah they had in mind seems an awful lot like the Caesar they already had in Rome, except that one was on their side and the other wasn't. Does a simple substitution sound like what God would do to bring abundant life to the whole world?

And so with this riddle, Jesus takes their idol and smashes it to the ground. If the Messiah is the Lord over David, how can the messiah also be

the son of David? How can the messiah be both spiritual ancestor and blood descendant? No, there is no good answer to that question, at least as long as you see the messiah in the terms to which they had reduced him. No, Jesus is saying, the Messiah does not conform to the image you have made of him, no matter how ferocious and victorious. It is as if Jesus is saying to them: I am the Messiah, but I am not *your* Messiah. I am the *Lord's* Messiah, and I will do things the way the Lord, not David, wants them done. I haven't come because *you* wished me into existence, but because God sent me. I haven't come to *answer* your questions. I have come to make you question yourselves and the way you live your life in relationship to God and to your neighbors. Remember that this question Jesus asks about the Messiah comes on the heels of the answer he has just given about which of the laws is the “greatest”, the most important.

If love of God and love of neighbor is God's intention for how we are to live, shouldn't the freedom to do that be what the Messiah brings? There was freedom of religion and equality under the law under the Emperor, but of course it was reserved for those with Roman citizenship. If the messiah in David's image comes victorious, there would once again be freedom to love God and love neighbor, except it would be reserved for those with Israelite ancestry. Yes, the definition of Messiah had become so narrow as to make

God's vision of shalom impossible.

I want to make a brief detour back to those Ten Commandments to recall just what the idea of neighbor is about, since it is the neighbor we are to love. In the Ten Commandments, and in many other places in the Old Testament, the definition of a neighbor is not the person you live next to, or who lives in the same town as you, but basically another human being. To cite just one example, in the Fourth Commandment, it is not just the native-born Israelites who are to observe the Sabbath, but “you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.” The Sabbath is for all people, and all creation. The Sabbath is an expression of God's love for everyone, and all creation, not just those we choose to associate with or consider our equal, or who our families or societies have defined as acceptable and worthy. The Sabbath comes before Jew or Gentile, it goes all the way back to creation, it is for the whole world, as is God's blessing. If your Messiah can't bring that blessing to the whole world, your messiah is no messiah at all. You will need to rethink that, you Pharisees. And it says that “no one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more question.” He asked them the impossible. He might as well have asked them how to go the moon and back. Yes, to the moon and back.

Well, I want to show you a short video about going to the moon and back. Forget for a moment it is an appeal to increase the budget of NASA. Listen for what Jesus is asking of the Pharisees and of us. (Watch video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFO2usVjfQc>).

Did you catch it? “We went to the moon and discovered the earth,” and it changed how we saw ourselves. *This* is what happens when the Messiah comes. We are changed. We are not just victorious, we are changed! What we value changes. What we work for changes. How we love changes. Who we consider our neighbor changes. We can’t look in the mirror and see who we used to be, but rather who the Messiah has made us. We can no longer look at another human being and call them an enemy. Can King David do that for you? Can any action figure image of the Messiah do that for you? Or is it only the one who invites us to die so that we can live?

In the ceremony during which you were baptized, you were probably reminded of the Apostle Paul’s words that “we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” We have died to sin and come out on the other side with a new perspective. We had to die to live. We had to go to the dusty, lifeless, waterless moon to discover the rich, bountiful, beautiful earth. And that’s not a trip you can take with a

Messiah that is too small, too manageable, too much like our fantasies.

But back to Jesus' riddle. It's OK. You don't have to be able to answer Jesus question either. He won't hold it against you. I don't think there really is an answer to it, but there is a way to respond to it. And that is to live your life differently. His words are an invitation to every generation to live our lives shattering the idols we've made of what Messiah is supposed to be and do, and to love God and love neighbor not as King David would do, by conquering and celebrating, but as Christ did for us, by dying and rising. NASA didn't just make one trip to the moon. And we too need to return to our Messiah again and again to keep the memory alive of how the world looks to God and how it must look to us. That's what keeps us moving forward in faith, when life gets tough and we get discouraged. Each day we must die and rise again. Let me invite you to ponder this week the size and shape of your Messiah, the assumptions you hold about who the Messiah is for and what the Messiah will do. And let me invite you to do that by taking a look at your own life to see in what ways it gives testimony to the new life the Messiah's given you. Amen.