

“Fearing the Child”  
December 31, 2006

Colossians 3:12-17  
Matthew 2:1-12

You may have noticed that it’s become fashionable in progressive Christian churches – like this one – and among progressive Christian preachers – like this one – to interpret Jesus’ life and ministry and the early spread of Christianity against the backdrop of the Roman Empire. This interpretation understands imperial power, violence, and exploitation as the status quo outside of which and against which Jesus preaches and teaches.

This understanding of the 1<sup>st</sup> century world of Judea, Galilee, and the Mediterranean basin brings at least two vital gifts to the life and faith of 21<sup>st</sup> century churches like this one. The first gift is that it helps us dismantle some the deeply anti-Jewish perspectives of the first 2000 years of Christianity. Traditional interpretations of the New Testament have painted Jesus as someone who lived and preached and ministered against Judaism, against his own religious tradition. These traditional interpretations have presented Jesus as someone who challenged not only the religious *establishment* but also the religious practices and understandings of his own people. But if we begin to recognize that Jesus and the early church were raising their voices against the power of the *empire*, not against Judaism – if we begin to recognize that Jesus and the early church proclaimed the holiness of God in counterpoint to the claimed holiness of *Caesar*, not in counterpoint to *Judaism’s* understanding of the holy – we can begin to dismantle the churches’ contributions to a long, ugly history of anti-Semitism. This is a good – and faithful – thing.

The other gift of understanding Jesus’ ministry as a critique of the dominant imperial ideology of his day is that it gives us a challenging but ultimately *liberating* critique of the dominant imperial ideology in *our* day. As we hear Jesus’ message – that the last shall be first and the first shall be last; that we love and serve God when we love and serve the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned; that we cannot serve both God and wealth – as we hear this message in the context of the 1<sup>st</sup> century’s powerful, violent, and exploitive Roman Empire, we can also hear his message in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s American empire. Just as Jesus and the early Christians called people out of their participation and accommodation to imperial power and ideology, so, too, do they call us out of *our own* participation and accommodation.

Now, unless you’re here for the first time, you know I’ve felt called to preach that message in this pulpit more than once, and I have no doubt that I’ll feel called to preach it and explore it well into the future. But for this morning, I feel called to move into a different direction, a more *intimate* direction, and these words from the Gospel of Matthew point us in that direction: “King Herod was frightened, and all of Jerusalem with him.” Hearing from the wise men that they are searching for the child who is born king of the Jews, “King Herod was frightened, and all of Jerusalem with him.”

So I want to ask you, knowing what you know of Jesus, the one who said, “If you want to be my disciple, pick up your *cross*, and follow me,” when you hear at Christmas that the Christ child is born, is there anything within you that joins all of Jerusalem in

fear? If you remember the challenging and broad message of the adult that child will become, is the news of his birth nothing but joyous good news?

Perhaps the Christmas story has become too familiar, too comfortable, too predictable. We can think about the babe in the manger, with shepherds and wise men, lowing cattle, and a radiant mother. This tableau is lovely, tame, and far from frightening.

But that newborn will become Jesus the teacher, prophet, and healer, whose ministry and message were so unsettling, so powerful, and so compelling that the Roman Empire and its hand-picked religious leaders in Jerusalem had to execute him. That newborn becomes the Jesus whose message continues to be so challenging, and even painful, that we're tempted either to keep him in that manger for good or to domesticate him into the gentle shepherd whose most challenging message to us is that we should gather together with other sheep and say, "Baaa, baaa."

But let's not domesticate him or his message this morning. Then we may find that we do have reason to feel threatened or frightened, when we hear and sing that Jesus is born.

Let's start with one of Jesus' foundational messages. This Jesus whose birth we celebrate is known to have taught his followers to love our enemies and to pray for persecutors. Loving our family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers fully and consistently is hard enough, but Jesus teaches that that is just the beginning. We are called to give up our hate, our ridicule, and our disdain of those people whose actions are destructive, arrogant, or hateful. We are called to love and pray for the man with a hangman's noose around his neck. We are called to love and pray for the occupant of the Oval Office, whoever he or she might be. And we are called to love and pray for the people of St. John's Anglican Church in Petaluma, who cannot yet see the love that God makes possible between two women or two men as the sacred gift that it is.

If we were willing to hear this call of Jesus, to love and pray for enemies and persecutors, we will recognize that the one whose birth we celebrate at Christmas poses a powerful threat to our own sense of self and our sense of superiority.

But Jesus threatens more than our prejudices and our willingness to condemn, even hate, our enemies and persecutors. Jesus seeks to remove anything and everything that blocks our embrace of generous, radical, courageous love as the center of all of who we are and all of what we do. When the disciples start squabbling about who among them will be the greatest, Jesus reminds them that the one who *serves* is the greatest. He reminds them that the one who serves, in faith and in love, is the one who becomes great by joining God in healing and redeeming a broken world. Jesus proclaims that my life is not meant to be about *me* and your life is not meant to be about *you*. *Our* lives are meant to be about *us*, the "us" of all the cosmos, the "us" that lives and moves and has our being in God. When – not "if" – *when* we fall into believing and acting as if we're the center of the universe, Jesus calls us to leave that falsehood behind and to embrace the truth of our rootedness in a God of love and our inescapable ties with one another.

As challenging and threatening and unsettling as these two truths of Jesus' ministry can be, there's a third that goes much deeper and, so, may be much more frightening. And that third, scarier truth is, ironically, one of the most liberating messages of Jesus' life and ministry. The third truth is the revelation of God's holy, healing power. I'm not talking about the power to heal diseases of the body and the

mind, although I don't discount that power, either. I'm talking about the Spirit's power to tend and heal the wounds that keep us trapped in believing that we are victims. I'm talking about the Spirit's power to heal and transform the wounds that distort our understanding of ourselves. Just as Jesus tells the man paralyzed man, "Get up, take your mat, and go," Jesus calls us to rise from our sense of being insufficiently loved or lovable or blessed and to walk humbly as the beloved and beautiful creations of God that we are.

At least on the surface, perhaps there's nothing frightening or threatening about the power of healing at work in and through Jesus, but take a moment to reflect on your own sense of woundedness or your own sense of limitation. Isn't it at least a bit frightening to consider that God calls us to step out of the cage of our own self-images? Isn't it at least a bit frightening that God calls us to leave behind all our excuses for not becoming the fully loving, creative, courageous people God created us and longs for us to become? I, for one, think it can be *more* than a little frightening.

Jesus calls us to the ultimate act of letting go ... to let go of our limited and self-defeating understandings of ourselves. If we're not willing to let go, theologian Dorothee Soelle warns us of the consequences. She writes, "If my hands are fully occupied with holding on to something, I can neither give nor receive." If we hold on to our wounds and woundedness for dear life, if we're not willing to let go and be healed from those wounds, we cannot *receive* the fullness of God's love and we cannot *offer* the fullness of loving service back to God and to one another. Jesus calls us to let go, receive, and offer.

So as we continue to celebrate the season of Christmas and as we greet the new year, let's not keep Jesus in that manger as a harmless infant. Let's be willing to encounter the loving, compassionate, and, yes, scary prophet that he became. Let us be willing to hear and accept his challenge to love all of God's people and all of God's creation. Let us be willing to hear and follow his call to serve. And let us be willing to hear and welcome the good news of God's healing love.

If this is what we hear when we hear that the Christ child is born, we may indeed feel the need to fasten our seatbelts for the ride of our lives, but we can also feel the never-ending embrace of God's love, blessing, and grace. It's a little scary and a *lot* glorious. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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