

Christmas Eve 2016, 9pm

One of the most exciting and essential parts of this Christmas story is usually overlooked or unmentioned on Christmas Eve. We're so involved in the sweetness of a mother and baby, in the pastoral serenity of barnyard animals, in the mysterious glory of angelic choirs, that we avoid the hard, vital honesty that this is a protest story.

It's not just telling us that Jesus was born in such-and-so way, which was coincidentally charming for carols and fitting for greeting card images. Rather, the details of this story right from his get-go place Jesus against expectations, against a dominant and domineering culture. Identifying this birth with God's presence very directly locates God in a place where most would not have claimed—and most would still not claim—that God would be present.

Actually, backing up a notch, these shocking details revealing God with Jesus were arising even before his birth: that the angel Gabriel was sent to a girl. Probably the same age as girls in our Confirmation class (which they were sort of horrified to learn). Beyond the biology of it, it is a meaningfully shocking detail that God came to Mary, a poor, young woman. By typical criteria, she sure wouldn't be identified with God's presence; God was supposed to be mighty, in palaces and buddied up to rulers. Even in the Jewish temple, God sat at the center, amid restrictive hierarchy of the elite male high priest having closest access, where women were kept exclusively to an outer courtyard. But in this case, God moved out to visit Mary, to work in conversation and collaboration.

And, for her part, Mary realized this was extraordinary and radical, even if difficult. After Gabriel's visit, she sang a song about how God was turning structures and systems on their head, lifting up the lowly while casting the mighty down from their thrones, filling the hungry with good things but sending the rich away empty.

This is more directly embodied in the birth of Jesus and this Christmas story. Again, it's placing God's presence away from the powerful, not in a castle or cathedral, but where there wasn't even room in the inn, officially announced to shepherds in the field, guys who couldn't hold a job with regular hours. And what could be more vulnerable than a baby's birth?

Even if we claim this is a newborn King, still that title subverts the usual claimants to the throne. Most particularly, the story challenges one directly: Caesar Augustus, the emperor of Rome. As he conquered most of the Western world and spread the empire around the Mediterranean, claiming allegiance and claiming tax revenue and claiming slaves from these beaten regions, he was also making claims for himself, that he was Lord, was divine, the son of god, that he was the bringer of peace and savior of the world.

Those terms and titles sound awfully familiar because you've heard them applied not to Caesar but to Jesus. Claiming them for Jesus contradicts Caesar, saying that the authority, the godly dynamics, the real presence for what matters didn't reside in the capital of the empire, surrounded by soldiers and in control of the Senate. This Christmas story is a direct protest against the occupying forces of Caesar.

Now, that protest served mostly in subversive encouragement, because there's no head-to-head contest where Jesus would win. He's born out in the boonies. As far as Caesar is concerned, it wasn't the Holy Land, but an outpost of an outpost, far at the edge of his empire. Even Jerusalem was scorned by Caesar, and this was a Podunk suburb of Jerusalem. The only claim Bethlehem had was as the birthplace of an ancient bygone King, of David, who had ruled a millennium prior. You see faded signs in small towns commemorating the softball team that won the Division 3 state title twenty-some years ago, and the nostalgia of Bethlehem's best victor was exponentially longer.

Still, there's something setting up our attention in Jesus about that King. David, after

all, was the underdog who used his sling to slay the giant, to take down Goliath and stop the oppressor. But this new Goliath from Rome would be harder to slay. Jesus would have no opportunity to confront Caesar in a duel. Rather, his peculiar victory we are still celebrating and still deliberating is that Jesus confronted Goliath and died, gave himself up on a cross, his final protest and the shocking embodiment that God wasn't with the mighty authorities, but identified with one who suffered unjustly in scorned death.

His faithful protest continues. We're singing next "O Little Town of Bethlehem," envisioning small streets of the unimportant village 2000 years ago when a homeless baby was born, shut out from warmth and yet identified as the center of God's presence, and then the song sees those same streets in Bethlehem today.

Our travel group met residents of those streets this fall and continued to realize the old difficulty: they are facing a Goliath, and they have practically no chance of slinging the right stone that will bring down the giant and end the oppression and occupation. That's because their Goliath isn't just one big baddy but is a spreading, lurking, cancerous system that tracks their every movement and watches what they put on Facebook and keeps them from traveling to see family and puts up walls that separate them from their livelihoods and establishes laws to shut up life and keep them curfewed and close off possibility at every turn.

Yet we saw Bethlehem's protest, the proclamation of God's presence and the celebration of life even while the authorities claim that's not where it should be found. They dance, they play sports. They cook and grow vegetables. They create artwork, like angels from shards of stained glass shattered by tanks. They speak truth to power. They graffiti messages of hope and humor on the wall that's there to confine their wellbeing. They worship, they cherish community, they care for their young, teaching peace in schools. All of this, which may sound as normal as the birth of a

baby and as low wage workers on the late shift, this is all transformed into a protest, when living itself requires courage and existence is resistance to the Goliaths of empire, just as that first Christmas.

This is a time when we may need to be reinforced in those practices ourselves. You may need to hear the protest of this Christmas story. You may need the examples, the witness, the martyr of others engaged in subverting authorities and resisting oppressors, of toppling terror and restoring righteousness, of hope over fear.

I'm going to end this message of reinforcement with words by my favorite artist. I've certainly never quoted him in a Christmas sermon, but maybe now that he's a Nobel laureate Bob Dylan's got some additional credibility. Or maybe you can just hear these words from 50 years ago as a blessing and hope amid the darkness, echoing why Jesus was born, to strengthen you this evening. Bob said: *"Nowadays there are crueller Goliaths who do crueller, crueller things, but one day they're gonna be slain, too, and people two thousand years from now can look back and say, Remember when Goliath the 2<sup>nd</sup> was slayed?"*

Take courage, dear people, and be not afraid. This is the world a baby was born into, the world God so loved, the world that needs you.