

Striking Back at the Empire

December 24, 2017

The song “Christmas in the Trenches” tells the story of the western front during the first winter of World War I. In the week leading up to Christmas Eve, German, British, and French soldiers made a brief truce and ventured into No Man’s Land. In some areas, the truce lasted only half an hour or so, long enough to retrieve the dead and wounded. In other areas, though, the soldiers put down their arms, serenaded one another with Christmas carols, shared chocolates and stories and photographs from home. There are even reports that some units played soccer against one another.

The song “Christmas in the Trenches” ends with these lyrics:

Soon daylight stole upon us and France was France once more.
With sad farewells we each began to settle back to war.
But the question haunted every heart that lived that wondrous night
“whose family have I fixed within my sights?”
It was Christmas in the trenches where the frost so bitter hung.
The frozen fields of France were warmed as songs of peace were sung.
For the walls they’d kept between us to exact the work of war
had been crumbled and were gone forever more.
The ones who call the shots won’t be among the dead and lame
On each end of the rifle we’re the same.

Friends, the reason this is such a powerful Christmas story isn’t because it happened at the end of December. It’s an incredible Christmas story because it embodies the radical, life-altering story we celebrate tonight.

As Marcus Borg writes in his book, *The God We Never Knew*, “The point is not that Jesus was a good guy who accepted everybody, and thus we should do the same (though that would be good). Rather, his teachings and behavior reflect an alternative social vision. Jesus was not talking about how to be good and how to behave within the framework of a domination system. He was a critic of the domination system itself.” Christmas is, at its heart, a strike at the Empire. It’s God’s alternative vision to Caesar and war and violence.

How so, you ask? We’ve domesticated the Christmas story over the years into a birthday party for a baby who doesn’t cry. But Jim Wallis, the editor of *Sojourner’s* magazine, reminds us that in the Christmas story:

Mangers are more important in God’s world than hotels. The Word comes to poor shepherds before billionaires in God’s world. Humility wins over pathetic boasting in God’s world. Peace and mercy triumph over angry attacking in God’s world. When politics destroys the ‘calm’ and ‘bright,’ God brings both back. Love’s pure light will win over all the hate in God’s world. When politics gives us

nothing but weary words, O how we need the 'thrill of hope' from a new and glorious morn!

(Truly listen to the lyrics of the glorious carol which Rita and Chris shared with us in the prelude.)

*Truly he taught us to love one another,
His law is love and his gospel is peace.
Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother,
And in his name, all oppression shall cease.*

This is the great reversal of Christmas. In God's name, all oppression, and racial bigotry, and the fueling of division and conflict for political self-interest . . . shall cease."

Christmas is a strike at the Empire.

Without offering too many spoilers, I'd like to suggest that the new Star Wars movie, *The Last Jedi*, can be seen as a Christmas movie. It's a story of striking back at the empire, a tale of telling a very different narrative than the dominant powers that be. In *The Last Jedi*, we find our heroes at a precarious turning point. Despite the fact that all hope seems to be lost, despite the fact that there is barely a remnant of the resistance, Vice Admiral Holdo holds firm, proclaiming, "All across the galaxy the oppressed and downtrodden know our symbol, and it gives them hope. We are the spark that will light the fire of resistance."

But notice, the resistance makes its greatest inroads not by using the tactics of the empire, but those of the Resistance. This is exemplified best when Rose proclaims, "That's how we're going to win: not fighting what we hate, but saving what we love." In Christmas, God does not fight what is hateful; God saves what God loves.

Joe Kay, the Associate Pastor at Nexus United Church of Christ, in Butler County, Ohio, reminds us:

The Christmas story is a subversive story. It erases the lines we draw between ourselves and others. It turns our values and our ways of thinking upside-down.

This story begins with the approval of a woman. An angel is sent to Mary, not to Joseph. It's Mary who gets to decide — by herself — whether the Jesus story will unfold. Her "let it be" (her consent) makes everything possible.

The Christmas story also warns us never to think that our theology, our religion, or our country matters more than others. The Magi — visitors from different lands, different cultures, different religions — are welcomed and given an equal place in the subversive story.

The manger reminds us of a baby born in the humblest of settings to poor parents from an impoverished community. He's not born in a castle surrounded by royalty and privilege. He's important not because of what he has or where he lives, but because of how he brings love, healing, and reconciliation into the world.

The Christmas story is a direct assault on how we perceive importance. It challenges the notion – then and now – that the powerful and wealthy deserve their privilege and that we should all strive to be like them. It also defeats the notion that the poor, the homeless, and the refugees don't matter – they're slackers anyway. Maybe this is why King Herod wanted Jesus dead. This baby would spend his life challenging the king's value system. Woe to the rich; blessed are the poor. The first are last; the last are first. The ones considered the least among us are the greatest; and the ones who consider themselves great are actually the least able to bring God's unconditional love, compassion, and healing into the world. This Christmas story is meant to turn our world inside-out.

This sight of poor refugee parents and a humbly born baby surrounded by dirty shepherds and visitors from other religions and races and cultures should jolt us.

Again, following the Christ of Christmas is a means of striking back at the Empire, the values of the Empire, a means of aligning ourselves once more with that which God values.

If all of this talk of Empire is too abstract for you, I share a story from Harriet Richie, a writer from Anderson, South Carolina. She and her family had been to a Christmas Eve service that ended after midnight. After worship, her husband announced that he was hungry and wanted breakfast. Being almost 1 a.m., none of the usual places they might have gone were open. They made their way to the interstate where an all-night truck stop was still open:

A few big diesels rumbled outside. Inside a few truckers sat at the counter. A jukebox played country music. On the front window was a string of colored blinking lights. The place smelled like bacon grease and stale coffee. A one-armed man behind the counter nodded the family toward a booth.

Soon a waitress named Vera sauntered over, handed them their menus and asked what they wanted to drink. Harriet looked around. She felt a little bit like a snob and out of place. Her family had just come from a beautiful Christmas Eve service. And soon they would be heading to their lovely home for the night. She thought one day they would look back with a laugh and say to each other, "Remember that

Christmas we ate breakfast at that truck stop? That awful music and those tacky lights?"

She was staring out the window when an old Volkswagen van drove up. A young man with a beard and baggy jeans got out, walked around and opened the door for a young woman who was holding a baby. They hurried inside and took a booth near the back.

After Vera, the waitress, took their order, the baby began to cry, and neither of the young parents could quiet him. Finally, Vera set down her coffee pot and held out her arms for the baby. "Hon, just sit there and drink your coffee. Let me see what I can do."

Soon it was evident that Vera had done this before. She began walking around the place showing the baby to first one of the truckers and then another. One began whistling a Christmas tune and making silly faces. Quickly the baby stopped crying and began cooing.

Vera showed the baby the blinking lights on the jukebox. She brought the baby over to Harriet's table. "Just look at this little darlin'," she said. "Mine are so big and grown they don't need me no more."

The one-armed fellow behind the counter brought a fresh pot of coffee, and, as he refilled their mugs, Harriet felt tears in her eyes. Her husband wanted to know what was wrong. "Nothing," she said, "just Christmas." Reaching in her purse for a Kleenex and a quarter, she said to her own kids, "Go see if you can find a Christmas song on the jukebox."

When they were gone, Harriet quietly said almost to herself, "He would have come here, wouldn't he?"

"Who?" her husband asked.

"Jesus. If Jesus were born here tonight and the choices were our neighborhood, the church or this truck stop, it would be right here, wouldn't it?"

Her husband didn't answer right away, but looked around the place, at the people there. Finally he said, "I suppose either here or a homeless shelter."

"That's what bothers me," Harriet said. "When we first got here I felt sorry for these people because they probably aren't going home to nice neighborhoods where the houses have candles in the windows and wreaths on the doors. And listening to that awful music, I thought, I'll bet nobody here has even heard of Handel. Now I think that more than any place I know, this is where Christmas is."

Friends, if we read the Gospel, we discover that God's value system and economy are very different from ours. By bringing the Savior into the world in a poor country town, to an illiterate, unwed, teenage refugee, by proclaiming the birth to lowly shepherds, God invites us into a whole new way of being. Indeed, God invites us in to a new hope.

My prayer tonight is that we will commit ourselves to being Christmas Christians, that we will commit ourselves to living out the Gospel which is achieved not by violence, but by love. Not by fighting what we hate, but by saving what we love. May it be so.

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