

Order of Service -- December 23, 2018
The People Who Walk In Darkness Have Seen a Great Light

Musical Prelude -- O Holy Night

Greeting -- Journey of Advent

1st Hymn: Green 70, It Came Upon a Midnight Clear

Readings -- Isaiah 9:2, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-3, 7-13; Revelation 22:20

2nd Hymn: Green 213, All Through the Night

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude -- O Come, O Come Emmanuel

Prayer -- Let the Weary World Rejoice

3rd Hymn: Green 83, Christmas Morning

Message: Even So, Come, Lord Jesus

Silent worship

4th Hymn: Red 250, Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Closing -- Onward we go, faithfully into the dark

Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude

Greeting

Good Morning Friends. Marcus Borg, the late New Testament scholar, wrote that we are invited to take a journey of faith and spiritual maturation in our yearly encounter with the Christmas stories found in the Bible. He suggested that this journey begins in a state of pre-critical naivete, and traverses through critical thinking, on its pilgrimage toward what he called a post-critical naivete. Pre-critical naivete is that effortless state of childlike wonder, idealized this time of year, that takes no work of faithfulness, because the miracles and the magic are simply accepted as givens, literally, historically, and factually true. Critical thinking, he said, marks the end of that wonder-filled, magical innocence and can come with a sense of loss, a necessary, painful step in growing up. There is doubt, and questioning the given way things are presented. It's where the nature of truth, selfhood, and the meaning of faith are parsed out. A state of post critical naivete is the opposite of cynicism. It's spiritual adulthood, and it finds a way to marry critical thinking and wonder. It's characterized by an ability to hear and inhabit theological narratives like the Christmas stories on their multiple layers of truth -- parabolic, metaphorical, spiritual, and political. Not necessarily as factual dispatches from the past but as nevertheless profoundly true narratives, penetrating myths suffused with meaning, relevant in their time and in ours. I like to think that this spiritual pilgrimage is one we take each Advent, and that it is not a straight line, but more like a winding path that doubles back in on itself, that spirals and loops around, so that we experience each state more than once, as we hear again the stories that have been told for thousands of years. So once more, we come to the end of that pilgrimage, to the last Sunday of Advent. The stable lies before us. The child is on his way. Wherever, however we are, ready or not, **let's sing together again of those ancient stories. our first hymn is from the Green hymnal, It Came Upon a Midnight Clear, number 70.**

Readings

Isaiah 9.2, 4-6 ²The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light; those who live in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined.... ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken... ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Matthew 2:1-3; 7-13 *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened...Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. ¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”*

Revelation 22:20-21 Even so, Come, Lord Jesus. And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Prayer

God of Peace, God of the Silent Holy Night, God of the Deepest Dark, God of the morning star, we walk now in darkness. We cannot see where to put our feet and each step is an act of faith that you are here with us, that you will be here with us,

no matter what. We pray in this longest night, for faith. We pray for the faith to keep walking, all through the night. For the faith to keep watch for the star that will guide us. For the faith in each other, our beloved fellow travelers, children of God, bearers of Christ's light, faith that we will all listen and hear the songs of the angels bending near the earth, and we will all lift our voices together in answer. We pray that there will come a time when the boots of tramping warriors and the desperate plans of the fearful are stilled, when they too fall on their knees, and hear the angel voices. O, let them be stilled, God of Peace. Bless their bodies and ours, as human and as vulnerable as the infant Jesus. Bless this world, the very same into which Christ is Come. Let us all kneel beside one another...Let there be peace, at last, on earth... Let your whole weary world rejoice.

Benediction "December" by Gary Johnson

*A little girl is singing for the faithful to come ye
Joyful and triumphant, a song she loves,
And also the partridge in a pear tree
And the golden rings and the turtle doves.
In the dark streets, red lights and green and blue
Where the faithful live, some joyful, some troubled,
Enduring the cold and also the flu,
Taking the garbage out and keeping the sidewalk shoveled.
Not much triumph going on here—and yet
There is much we do not understand.
And my hopes and fears are met
In this small singer holding onto my hand.
 Onward we go, faithfully, into the dark
 And are there angels singing overhead? Hark.
Even So, Come Lord Jesus.*

Message

In these last weeks leading up to Christmas, my ten-year old son Cyrus has been occupying, very pointedly, a developmental stage just exactly at the juncture of pre-critical naivete and critical thinking. While he's sincerely and with childlike enthusiasm participated in family traditions of baking and decorating Christmas cookies and making a gingerbread house, he's also asked questions that force me to examine the ways and the assumptions that I have taken for granted, like why does it matter to have decorations on the Christmas tree arranged in a certain aesthetic pattern and not just literally thrown on to see where they land? Or, why can't all the decorations be smushed into one spot on the tree so the decorating can be accomplished quickly without having to move? In a time and culture with so much emphasis placed on the way things look, I felt those questions, rightly, as a challenge from a critical thinker to examine what's important, and why. Why do I value a certain kind of aesthetic Christmas composition? Why does it matter? And early on in Advent, my on-the-edge-of-critical-thinking son asked me why **King Herod** is not one of the roles enacted in the Christmas pageant every year. Why, he demanded to know, do adults insist on presenting to children these Christmas stories found in the Bible as gauzy, wonder- and joy-filled tableaux, when everyone knows that the story of this baby ends with -- his word -- an assassination? He groped for the words to describe his sense that there is something weird or misleading or somehow evasive about the way adult re-telling of the Christmas stories seems to avoid asking about the part that Herod plays.

As an installed agent of the Emperor Augustus, the name of King Herod served as a potent political and spiritual symbol. It would have been a signal to the hearers of these stories that the stories were to be understood as theological and political parables about the clash between the Kingdom of Rome and its Pax Romana, and the Kingdom of God and the Peace of Christ. The Roman Empire had a plan for peace on earth, and Caesar Augustus was its Prince of Peace, it's Savior, it's Redeemer. It's program was an all-consuming military, economic, political and ideological domination. It was peace through victory, peace upheld by sheer overwhelming force. The Christmas story and its exaltations of **Jesus** as Savior, as Redeemer, as Prince of Peace should not, and cannot, be understood without that context. Cyrus is right. It would be like talking about Gandhi's Hinduism without

mention of British imperialism, or the faith and practice of Martin Luther King Jr without mention of American structural racism. To allow Herod's presence to slide, a little footnote and nothing more, is to truncate our own faithful journey toward spiritual maturation in our relationship with these enduring stories of Jesus' birth. Asking about Herod is asking specifically about how living under Roman occupation informed the ways that first century Jews understood the spiritual and political meanings of Christmas.

At the time when the gospels of Matthew and Luke were written, 50 years **after the death** of Jesus, to call Jesus Lord, the Son of God, over and against the emperor to whom those accolades solely belonged, and to call him the King of the Jews over and against Herod the Great was a direct repudiation of empire's vision of peace through victorious violence. To give those titles to the infant Jesus, who had become a symbol of radical anti-imperialism; to give those titles to a beloved rabbi who **had**, as Cyrus pointed out, been assassinated **by** the agents of empire, was a decisive confession of allegiance, commitment and loyalty to a vision of peace not through victory, but through justice and nonviolence. This vision of justice is rooted in the Judaic prophetic tradition, which might be called the self-critical thinking part of the Hebrew Scriptures, quoted extensively in the Christmas stories in Luke, in the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, and in our reading today from Isaiah. The Christmas stories in the gospels would have been an extremely dangerous confession in their day. And so they beg the question of us: Are they dangerous today? Is Christmas subversive in our day, as it was in the first century? Is it as threatening to those in power today as it was to Herod? What is our Christmas relationship to the current iteration of empire within which we live? Perhaps my son put his finger on the most uncomfortable of theo-political truths, which is that for the millenia and a half since the emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, the Church that claims Christ and Jesus as its own has situated itself right at the heart of the domination system, right inside it. It's very difficult to preach peace through justice from there. And in our time, Christmas has found its radical subversion subservient to an all consuming extreme materialism that is as pervasive as empire and devours everything in its path. Perhaps we avoid Herod because somewhere along the way, the Church installed itself as empire's agent.

Marcus Borg argued that the journey from pre-critical naivete, through critical thinking, toward post-critical naivete is a journey of spiritual maturation, of growing wisdom, and of becoming more fully human. It's a journey set before us as adults every year during this season when we are invited, from every checkout counter, every store blaring glad tidings of great sales and every beloved Christmas movie ever made, to believe. *Because we still want so much to believe.* Embedded as we are in the domination system of our day and time, the question is what to believe in. And how, knowing what we know as adults, do we believe in something other than the gospel of total conquest, of total acquisition, of the shiny, be-ribboned box we live in, and that we can only fleetingly see outside of?

Digging down beneath the mountains of packaging, listening under the carols, at the end of our Advent pilgrimage, we find ourselves back at the stable because there is no room at the glittering inn, lit up like a monument that only those who know the right people or can pay the right price can enter. We might even be in that club, but we turn away. Slowly we stumble toward the crude, rough-hewn manger holding its precious freight, an imperiled Afro-Semitic little boy whose young parents will take him and will flee in exile to Egypt, an exodus in reverse. We raise our faces to the light of the Eastern star, and we try to be led, step by faltering step, through arguments and evidence and the unspeakable horrors we wish we could unsee, to some simple belief we can name and offer to the children who ask us questions we would rather not answer. We grope after belief in the possibility of peace and goodness that can still guide us like a morning star heralds the dawn. We follow behind the magi, emissaries of interfaith hope, human solidarity, seeking what can only be found in vulnerability and not in military strength. We trail after the anonymous shepherds, the first ones to see, doing the jobs that must be done, with chapped hands and clothes smelling of animals, those who stare in awe, in silence and trembling, who are told by God's own messengers not to be afraid. We listen again to those angel voices, and send back their song in our own voices, singing of how the weary world rejoices, at last, how all the hopes and fears of all the years are met by the rock bottom faith that God is with us, even in the cold and darkness that seem so total. And it is there in the darkness we meet Herod, reeking with fear, a coward with the power of the empire behind him, afraid of children. We look him in the eye, we are truthful, but faithful to the dreams we are given, and we head toward home by a route other than the one he guards.

My hope for Cyrus, for all the children growing up in these perilous times, is that he comes through the loss of his childlike pre-critical naivete *not cynical*. That he marries his impressive critical thinking with wonder at the three-dimensional way that the myths of our spiritual ancestors still build temples of meaning out of humble stables. That he knows that there were then, that there are now, that there have always been, and always will be those who bow not before the emperor, those who defy empire's logic, those who with great dignity, and even humor, withhold consent, refuse the legitimacy of Caesar's Lordship and Herod's Kingship and do not call him Great. I hope he sees that there are those who raise their voices, joyful and triumphant, against all the powers and principalities, all the arrayed forces of the domination system, all the ways that Herod still lurks unacknowledged, tacitly accepted, and approved of. Who come again to Bethlehem despite all the ways that Christmas is, has been, and remains domesticated, co-opted, and unthreatening to the Herods and Caesars of our day. I hope he sees that even so, even so, there are and will be still those who call out into the longest night, come, Lord Jesus, come. Who place their faith and their measure of the labor of the ages in hope, in generosity, in audacious, risky kindness, in a true and durable peace on earth brought by prophetic justice and goodwill toward all, in Something Holy that cannot be bought or sold, in Something That Is More Real Than Empire, in the Most Real Thing, in God's power with us even and especially in our poverty and our weakness, in the possibility of transformation, **here and now**, in **this** weary world. Though the hero of our story will be taken from us, and we will need to figure out how to go on, I hope he sees that we do go on. We will go on. Tired, aching and humbly brave, all sorts of nameless people will fall on our knees, will hear the angel voices, and lo, into the world in sin and error pining, a light will break once again. I hope Cyrus sees, just as he rightly as he saw Herod as the context without which Christmas is stripped of its most potent, most dangerous meanings, that every time we side with the gentle or the unschooled, the unwanted or the unwashed, every time we risk our tender hearts and bodies, proclaim that Jesus and not Caesar is Lord, we place our faith in the Christ child, and in the ones who nurture Christ and bring Christ to birth. That's how we whisper into the wind, Even so, Come, Lord Jesus. That's how, once more, the people who walk in darkness see a great light.

