

December 27th, 2020

Luke 2:22-40 “We Are Not Alone”

This is Sunday, December 27th in the year of our Lord 2020, although some people are bound to say, “What did we do to upset our Lord to have a year like 2020?” Well, there are plenty of people lined up out there with lists of reasons why the Lord might be upset with us. Among the usual suspects, we have those who during the holiday season are the ones who want to grouse about an imaginary “war on Christmas.” These are the folks who are upset because Target, Starbucks, Macy’s and other conscientious businesses instruct their employees to wish people “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas.” Now for the big question - What is more likely? Is this mandate a politically correct attempt for the godless elites of this world to further discriminate against ... nay *persecute* Christians by trying to take the “Christ” out of “Christmas?” Or ... is it an honest attempt to acknowledge that there are those among our population who observe other traditions and it’s just easier to say, “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukah, Blessed Solstice, and Have a Great Kwanza?”

Throughout history there have been several *real* wars against Christmas starting as early as third century Rome. But I want to zero in on my favorite “real war” on Christmas. This one was waged in England during 1600s. Here’s what Christmas had devolved into: On Christmas Day, the lower classes would gather together in mobs, dress up in costumes, go around to the estates of the well-to-do class and demand food and alcohol. They’d sing “carols” or “wassails” ... bawdy little songs that were supposed to inspire the lords of these estates to “give them some figgy pudding” with the promise that “they won’t go until they get some, so bring it right here.” See? Some of these songs still survive today. I’m not making this stuff up. Good thing the carol that began with “Come bring with a noise/My merrie merrie boys/The Christmas log to firing,” and ended with: “And if you don’t open up your door/We will lay you flat upon the floor.” I can’t imagine Nat King Cole or Bing

Crosby singing that one. And here's the thing ... these estates would often *give in* to their demands for food and alcohol just to make them go away. Talk about "Taking Christ out of Christmas!" So if we want to talk about re-claiming some traditions that are inspired by ... you know ... Christ then let's go back to the beginning in Luke's gospel.

As someone who was born and raised in a Western nation, I have this image of Joseph and Mary making this solitary journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be counted in the Roman census. In the little movie that I play in my head, I see them all alone out in this vast, empty landscape braving the elements. The only lodging they could find is a cold, lonely stable in this "Little Town of Bethlehem." I also get the impression that Bethlehem is pretty quiet too. "How still we see thee lie." The streets are dark save for the everlasting light that's shining from Jesus. Mary and Joseph. All alone. Desperately seeking out some semblance of shelter so that she could give birth to the Christ child. But again, this image is a product of Western culture. That's the way this story is often portrayed in art and sculpture. The reality is that Mary and Joseph probably traveled to Bethlehem with Joseph's family from Nazareth. Think about it, why would they be the sole members of their families to make that journey? They went to Bethlehem because that's where Joseph's family originated. Why would Joseph's family back in Nazareth say, "Hey, could you be a good sport and take your very pregnant bride-to-be and hike on down to Jerusalem all by yourselves and represent the family please?"

In my little movie, I see Mary giving birth in a stable with only Joseph, three shepherds, and a few animals when it's really more likely that she had *other* family there as she gave birth in a warm, safe, place even though it was stable and a manger. In my Western-made brain movie, I see the couple raising Jesus in a one-child nuclear family unit although it's more likely that they lived in a family compound with aunties, uncles, cousins and Jesus' siblings. As I continue to learn more about ancient Middle Eastern culture, "alone" is a very Western concept. It

sure wasn't the way of life in first century Palestine, nor is it in 21st century Palestine either.

The stories of Jesus' birth and childhood don't spell out this bustling, busy life because the people who first heard these stories didn't need to be told. Everyone knew that a household was made up of extended family. Why wouldn't it be? It would be strange not to. Also, everyone would have known that *every* first-born Jewish son is presented for the ritual of redemption. Since the first and best of all things belong to God, the first child in the family belongs to God; and so, the parents redeem him by paying a small sum, and then having a short ritual performed over him. And to cap it all off, the original audience of this story knew that the prophet Elijah is always invoked at the celebration, and that the new birth, like every new birth, would be linked to the renewal of hope for the coming messianic age.

I'm not saying this to destroy the movie that you have in your head about how Jesus' birth and what his childhood might have looked like. I've got a nativity set at home that's pretty much the same as everyone else's as far as the "lonely manger in a stable" goes. But I do want you to consider that Jesus may not have been raised in this little "solitary bubble of holiness." I want you to consider that he was a normal child going through the standard rituals for a firstborn Jewish boy. And instead of thinking that the adults he encountered behaved strangely when they expressed the hopes of the prophets, we realize that the adults were expressing the hopes and expectations that are heaped onto *every* newborn. In this story there were variations to the usual patterns, which is why the words amazed Mary; but at its heart, this is a story about a firstborn Jewish boy being inducted into his religious culture.

I was thrilled at Max and Hillary's news about expecting a child last week! I know that her baby will be welcomed and will be a sign of blessing to their families and their church families as well. In our time as well as in Jesus' time, babies are a sign of life and hope. Some of the best moments we've had here in this church have been when new

parents present their children in worship. And we, the congregation, make a promise to help the family along the way. And these types of rituals are practiced worldwide in different faith traditions and cultural contexts. Babies are awesome! Children are a blessing! Sometimes we use the old cliché that it takes a village to raise a child. But honestly, when you stop and think about it, this is true and has been throughout history. Decades of social research back this up too. It takes a company of committed people, of all different ages, to raise a healthy, resilient child who grows up strong in spirit, and is filled with wisdom.

One of my biggest criticism of modern Western culture is that a lot of children are missing out on so many important lessons and experiences because we've become so ... insular. There seems to be this loosening of family and religious ties. There's a shift away from "neighborhood life." I love it when someone posts stories on social media about growing up where kids played and socialized together outside, and if they did something bad, by the time they got home, the parents knew about it because families had a sense of community and helped keep their kids accountable. That's not the standard anymore. We've become so tied to this rugged Western individualism model. And it's sad, because so many kids today can't even identify a trusted adult outside of their home.

Don't get me wrong, I'm attached to the "rugged Western individual" model too. But when individual freedom starts to overshadow the importance of social relationships it can be hard for us to know how potentially destructive this way of life is for our children. We used to have all sorts of "rites of passages" that helped move our kids along from childhood to adulthood, but they're getting fewer and farther between. It's almost as if parents are determined to raise their kids in some kind of "bubble of aloneness." Kids need to be anchored to a broad community with shared values, but still allows for individual differences and freedom.

You might be thinking, “So is this our call to end the war on Christmas? To tell us that Jesus was raised by an extended family and so we ought to raise our kids that way too? Isn’t Christmas about the Incarnation ... about Jesus being the divine presence here on earth?” Yes! It is. And that’s what the whole season of Advent and our Christmas Eve service was all about. But remember, we have 12 days to celebrate Christmas! And there’s a lot more to the Christmas story ... especially as it relates to the time between when Jesus was born and the time he began his public ministry. If we want to get back to what it means to honestly and truly celebrate the birth of Christ ... and that’s what “real” Christmas is all about, right? If we’re going to celebrate the birth of Christ, maybe we need to rethink what that looks like to model that in our families and communities.

Let’s ask questions like, “How do we enculturate children into the stories of faith? What are our hopes for our children? What demands will we place on them? What responsibilities do *we* share for the children *we* know, whether at home, at church, or through our wider networks? How can we, as a faith community, support the children in our midst and the adults who raise them, and encourage them to grow into people of faith?” Let’s just start by recognizing that Jesus didn’t grow up alone, nor should our children have to. Their participation in the life of the church is a significant part of their development and formation, and, no doubt, ours too. Let’s think about tools, patterns, and practices that we can utilize that will help our children grow deeper into this emerging reign of God.