

The Lost Cause of Christmas

Advent III

Text: 1 Samuel 2:8; Luke 1:52-53

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

December 17, 2000

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Last week I spoke a bit about Christmas and its drivenness and the frenzy of the season that can be so distracting for us that we fail, ironically, to do the very thing the Advent season is for, which is to wait, to be quiet, to contemplate. I spoke of that because I think it is an important fact of which to become aware, to be conscious. I didn't really mean to be "Rev. Grinch," throwing a wet blanket on your celebrations, and it was not one more preacher's harangue about keeping Christ in Christmas or scolding you for the commercialization of the day. That is not how I understand preaching. My task is not really to scold you or to drive you or impose guilt upon you. My task as a preacher is to hold up a slice of life and invite you to think about it, invite you to think with me about it in order that we might come to full consciousness of our lives, in order that we might come to an awareness so that we live our lives and are not simply lived, in order that we might live from the inside out, and so I try to hold up that slice of life and invite you to think with me. This is really a conversation in which you are invited to think about it with me. Receive it not as some authoritarian proclamation, some declaration from above, some dogmatic utterance which is absolute. It's more often tentative.

Someone went out last week and, apparently agreeing that the days could be frenzied and we could be driven in our life, said, "Now, next week tell me how to unplug." Well, as a matter of fact, we can't unplug. We are so thoroughly woven into the fabric of our cultural experience that what we have to do is live, learn to live with attention, and the only way that we can overcome that drive that would snuff out the spirit and stifle the emergence of spirit in our lives is through awareness and consciousness. But we cannot disengage from our social, political, economic structures, the whole social context in which we live. We could try to escape life somehow, maybe, flee to a monastery or a convent, but that's not possible for most of us. We're going to have to deal with life and all of its variety and all of its diversity and all of its seductiveness and all of its pressures and, in the midst of that, do our best to live with awareness that we might be intentional, that we might realize our fullest humanity and our greatest potential.

I saw a cartoon in *The New Yorker* the other day and clipped it out. The scene in the background was probably the Himalayas and there was a cave in front of which was sitting one of these Eastern gurus and there was a young man sitting in front of him with his backpack on, and the caption under the cartoon was, "Don't you think if I knew the meaning of life, I wouldn't be sitting in this cave in my underpants?"

That's the way I feel often when I prepare to come here to try to say something with enough significance to get you out on a Sunday morning in a blizzard when you might well read the paper with a cup of coffee. So, hear me again this morning as I address the idea of the lost cause of Christmas.

By the lost cause of Christmas, I want to set before you the almost impossibility of us celebrating the Christmas miracle as it originated in this world. I want you to think with me this morning about the fact that for people like us, it is almost impossible to observe Christmas according to its original meaning and intention – almost impossible, because the Christmas story is a story about a revolutionary movement toward liberation. It has a particular historical, social, economic, political context, and in the last decades we are becoming more and more aware of the times of Jesus, the time of Jesus' birth, the nature of the life of the average person the majority of which were peasants at the time that Jesus came into this world.

I hope this afternoon sometime you take a moment and read the page in your liturgy from a book, *The Message of the Kingdom*, by Richard Horsley and Neil Silberman. Horsley has another excellent book that I did not quote called *The Liberation of Christmas*, and these scholars have taken what we know now about the concrete historical context of Jesus' birth and life and, in setting that forth, have come to understand the birth stories, as I believe they were intended when they were written by Matthew and by Luke. The context of the world into which Jesus came was a world in which the people of Israel, God's, people, Jesus' people, were a people occupied by a foreign power, a backwater province in a vast Roman empire, and there was social disruption brought about by heavy taxation, loss-of land, movement to cities, and the ever-present Roman legions. The period is spoken of as the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace.

The Romans were not bad people. In fact they were wonderful administrators. They are still revered for the law, the administration of government of which they were geniuses. But, nonetheless, the bottom line was the Roman legion, and there was the exploitation and the oppression of the poor of the provinces, and the people to whom Jesus came were a marginalized people who were voiceless and powerless, and the Song of Mary, is a revolutionary ballad. The closest I could come to in thinking about a parallel in our own experience would be the song "We Shall Overcome."

There is tremendous power in music, tremendous emotional power that unites and bonds human beings in a cause or a movement- and those songs, in Luke's

gospel the *Magnificat* which I read a moment ago, the song of John, the *Benedictus*, the song of Simeon, the *Nunc Dimittis*, those songs which were based on the psalmody of the people of Israel's past – Mary's particularly, as I mentioned, very much dependent on the song of Hannah. Those songs that celebrated the birth of Jesus were revolutionary ballads, which celebrated the mighty act of God moving for the liberation of God's people. "The mighty cast down from their thrones, the lowly lifted up,,the hungry fed, the rich turned empty, away." The world is turned upside down in those songs. The way of the world as experienced by those poor and dispossessed people is turned upside down. There is a reversal of circumstance, and God is praised in a spirit of Doxology with great joy because now God has acted, God has moved, and those songs and the birth stories of Matthew and Luke are probably some of the earliest records we have of that early Jesus movement that was a revolutionary movement, looking for a change of historical circumstance, moving from being the underdog to the possibility of a humane existence. I don't think that, if we look at those songs carefully and if we put them into the context of which we are becoming more and more aware, the social, historical, economic, political context at the time of Jesus, there can be any question about that. Those songs continue that grand tradition of the Hebrew prophets who saw the possibility of an alternative world, of an alternative kind of community.

And so, I say to you what must be obvious - it is extremely difficult for us to celebrate Christmas in its original meaning and significance, because we just have nothing in common with the poor, marginalized, voiceless and powerless people among whom Jesus was born. We naively identify with those people. We put ourselves in the skin of Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and Simeon and Anna, the people of Israel to whom the Lord came, but, as a matter of fact, if we're honest, we're on the other side of the line. We are Rome. We are empire. We are affluent. We are powerful. We call the shots in our world, and for us to celebrate Christmas in its original meaning and significance is to undercut ourselves and the status quo, which has dealt very kindly with us.

Now, that isn't so profound and I think it must be clear if we think about it for a moment. The reason that Jesus was crucified, my old Lenten theme put concisely, is that he died the way he died because he lived the way he lived. The authorities, ecclesiastical and political, of the day of Jesus, rightly saw him as a threat to the world as it was organized at that time. Any time a world is organized in any time, those who are the power brokers are not going to want that world to be changed, and they are not going to be happy with the prophetic voice which suggests an alternative possibility. So, I simply make the point - for us to celebrate Christmas is pretty much of a lost cause.

So, what have we done? Well, I talked about one possibility last week. We have made a holiday out of it, and it's a wonderful holiday. Friends gathering together, families coming home, beautiful trees and flowers, the sights and sounds and fragrances of the season, all the remembrances of Christmases past, all of that

wonderful, beautiful, warm, human experience. Nothing wrong with that. We've made the Christmas mystery and miracle into a wonderful holiday.

I emerged from my lofty perch last night only to find that Nancy was channel - surfing. When Nancy surfs, she is bored. Now, on most Saturday nights she is bored because I am incommunicado from about Saturday noon until I get here Sunday morning, I grunt. That's all. But I emerged long enough to come down into the bedroom where she was surfing the TV only to see that Lawrence Welk had arisen from the dead and there he was! It was the conclusion of what must be a famous Christmas special that is probably trotted out every year about this time, and I entered just at the end of the program where Lawrence Welk said, "And here comes Santa Claus," and Santa Claus came out in all of his regalia and all of his splendor and the band struck up "Joy to the World, the Lord Has Come!" I said to Nancy, "God has just spoken to me. I'm going to write this down so I don't forget it." Precisely, precisely. On this wonderful holiday, Santa Claus comes and the band plays, "The Lord Has Come, Joy to the World!"

In the Church we have done another thing with it In the Church we managed to celebrate Christmas by weaving it from its original intention as a social protest, as a social critique, and moved it to the personal experience of salvation. We sang it a moment ago as a supplication and one of my favorite carols, "o Little Town of Bethlehem, Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today." It's wonderful. Nothing wrong with that, either. The personal experience of being in communion with God, being at peace with God, the experience of grace and forgiveness, my goodness, how could I be against that? It is very, very important. It is just that that is really not what Christmas was about. Christmas was about an alternative kind of community, a different kind of society, different power arrangements, different economic arrangements.

Now, if Jesus had been about personal salvation, Jesus may have gone about to people and said, "Are you saved? This is how you can be saved, if you will repeat this formula, if you believe in me, your sins will be forgiven and you will have the hope of heaven, the promise of something in another time and another world." The Gospels were not good news about the fact that a person can be reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. Paul talks about that, but then Paul thought the end was right around the corner and so he was excited about the fact that this treasure of Israel was for all people and all people could come into this experience of grace in this God of Israel, and of course, he identified this with the death and resurrection of Jesus which you don't find in the Gospels.

The birth stories in Luke serve as a preface to his Gospel, which is about the life and the ministry and the teaching of Jesus, and Luke tells us in those birth stories how he understood this Jesus. How he understood this Jesus, according to the Gospel that we read every Christmas, is that this one was the act of the eternal God coming into human experience in the flesh of Mary's child in order to change the world. But, we've been able to salvage some of the spirituality and the piety of

the holiday by turning it into the possibility of personal salvation and making of our Christian religion, frankly, a salvation cult. That's what we are, and we invite people to faith in Jesus, to receive forgiveness and have then heaven's gates open wide. Go through your hymnal, read your Christmas carols and just see how we have domesticated and spiritualized the story of the birth of Jesus. I don't mean to ruin the carols for you but, if you read them perceptively over against what was quite obviously the intention in the original story, you will find that we have made of this revolutionary liberation document an event, a matter of personal piety and salvation.

So, what are we to do? We can recognize, for one thing, that throughout the centuries the Christmas story has regained here and there its original intention, because there have been peoples who have read the story and found hope and been inspired and have initiated movements toward liberation and freedom.

Most recently in our own experience we know of Liberation Theology that originated among the poor, particularly in Latin and South America, in what they call base communities where the poor folk, the peasant folk would come together in homes and study the Gospels and they actually read themselves into the story. As I said a moment ago, we tend to identify with Anna and Simeon and Mary and all of them, when really we have to identify ourselves with the Roman Empire. These base communities of people that are dispossessed and socially outcast, marginalized and powerless, read themselves into the story and are able to identify with it and it has become a tremendous source of ferment and a movement toward more justice and equity and it has had that revolutionary intent realized in many of those communities. Interestingly, the Vatican has silenced some of the leading voices of Liberation Theology because the Church, in order to maintain its establishment status, doesn't want to rock the boat and get a peasant rebellion going, and so the Church has officially said you may not talk about the original meaning of Christmas. Continue to speak about saving souls.

You can have the most wonderful personal spiritual experience in the world and no one's going to care. You can be just as pious, just as devoted, just as full of faith, just as sure of your salvation as possible, and there is not a tyrant or a dictator or a politician anywhere who will bother you. It's only when you begin to speak and act like Jesus did that you get into trouble. But, the stories have been a stimulus for that through the centuries.

Still, here we are. What are we going to do? How are we going to celebrate Christmas, being in the position we are? Here I am white, male, affluent, powerful.

The nation went through an extended period of time without knowing which candidate for the Presidency actually won, and now we know. Some voices are being raised about the fact that there are minority groups that have been disenfranchised, and I don't suppose we're ever going to know the full story of everything that went on, or really who got what numbers of votes. But, I wonder

if there is anything to that. Is it a fact that minority people were herded down to get registered and that they went to vote, and once they went there, they didn't really know what they were doing? That's a possibility, isn't it? And one shouldn't be too surprised about that. For whatever reason you might defend it or attack it today, the Electoral College originally was instituted in order to ensure that the elite would rule, and as a matter of fact, when the elite rules, things go better. For people like me, at least, they do.

But, now, I wonder if there is anything to the claim that the poor and the marginalized were disenfranchised. Jesse Jackson says so. I don't like Jesse Jackson. I worry about the fact that I don't like him and I really ask myself, "Is it because he's black that you don't like him? Is it because he's black that your first response is negative?" I don't think it is; I think it's because of the curl of his lip and the shape of his moustache, but then, my mother didn't like my moustache, either. So, I have to say, when he comes on the screen, I don't want to hear him, and when he talks about a mass demonstration of minority folk on Martin Luther King's birthday in January, I say, "Jesse, we've just been through a rather strenuous period of time. Can't we get on with life? Can't you drop it? You're nothing but an opportunist, anyway. Why don't you just let it go?"

And then, I realize that I'd jolly well like it to be let go. In fact, I wouldn't change anything if it were up to me, if nobody complained. If there wasn't somebody out there, a gadfly, an irritant, a revolutionary, with all of his flaws and all of his foibles, if there wasn't somebody agitating, I wouldn't do anything about the world. What can a white, male, heterosexual, powerful, affluent person do to capture something of Christmas?

If I were a woman, I would use the revolutionary, ballads to get equal rights. If I were a person of homosexual orientation, I would use it in order to gain respect and dignity and be accepted just as a human being. But I'm on top of the heap. Any protest that changes anything is going to diminish my privileged position. How can I celebrate Christmas? Holiday cheer? Revel in my personal salvation?

And then, these words from Rudy Wiebe. I don't know who he is, but I like what he wrote:

Jesus says in his society there is a new way for people to live.
You show wisdom by trusting people.
You handle leadership by serving.
You handle offenders by forgiving.
You handle money by sharing.
You handle enemies by loving.
You handle violence by suffering.
In fact, you have a new attitude toward everything, toward everybody,
Toward nature,
Toward the state in which you happen to live,
Toward women,

Toward slaves,
Toward all and every single thing,
Because this is a Jesus society and you repent, not by feeling bad,
but by thinking different.

Maybe the only way I can be honest with Christmas and honest to God is to work
at thinking different.

References:

Richard Horsley and Neil Silberman. *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World*. Grosset & Dunlap, 1997.