

A Tale of Three Cities

From the Advent Series: God in the Mirror of Christmas

Micah 5:2-5a; Revelation 19:1-6; Matthew 2: 1-6, 16-18

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Advent 2001 would be similar in some respects to Advent 1941, for we celebrated on Friday sixty years of the attack on Pearl Harbor, which would have been the crisis of the world at the time that Advent was celebrated in '41, and once again, our world is in crisis in this 2001 Advent season. It is a season in which we are particularly thoughtful about history, about the calendar of God, about where things are and whether or not there is something going on which is more than meets the eye.

I remember a story told me by Bruce Thielman, who is a pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, a great pulpit historically, who had a great preacher of a former generation, Clarence McCartney. Bruce Thielman said he was rummaging around in the attic of old First Presbyterian, Pittsburgh, one day and he came across some sermons, including the sermon that McCartney preached on the 14th of December in 1941 and he said from reading the sermon there would have been not the slightest hint that the world was in crisis, which perhaps is a symbol of the oftentimes irrelevancy of the pulpit.

Certainly in Advent we cannot escape contemplating the meaning of the events that have pressed in upon us because it is the theme of this season of the year when we particularly wonder about the course of human history and the engagement of God in that history. The Christian faith inherited that concern about history from the womb of Judaism from which it emerged, for the Hebrew prophets are credited with causing the world to think historically, to think in terms of beginning and process and consummation.

The prophets lived by a dream. I don't know what it was, call it the inspiration of the Spirit of God, call it the intuition of a particularly blessed people who were living as a very small and beleaguered people through most of their existence, but in any case, the Hebrew prophets had a magnificent dream of an alternative world. You remember that dream - of a world of human wellbeing, when the lion

and the lamb would lie down together and they would not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain, that dream of shalom.

The early Jesus Jewish movement, of course, were the children of that dream, that dream which was so powerful in its provision of hope for a people who had suffered so much and so long, and there were those in the early movement, the Jesus movement, who said certainly this one, Jesus, was the designate of God. He must be the anointed one of whom the prophets spoke. The Hebrew word for anointed is *messiah*, of course, and so they were saying this Jesus is the messiah. That so characterized, so marked Jesus, that he became known as Jesus Christ, but Christ is simply the Greek word for anointed. Jesus, the anointed, Jesus the messiah, Jesus the Christ - what the early Church was saying was that that one the prophets foresaw, that one who would come and bring justice and righteousness and peace to the earth, that one was none other than Jesus. And so, the Christian Church came into its future expectation honestly, out of the womb of its Hebrew mother.

Then, of course, there was a surprise, for that anointed one was crucified. Who could have thought it? Who could have dreamed it? And yet, the crucified one they experienced alive in their midst, and they spoke of resurrection. And certainly, then, this time of Jesus' absence from them would be a brief interim in which the good news could be proclaimed, and then certainly, soon, he would come again. The Book of Revelation from which I read a moment ago ends with, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus," and he says, "Behold, I come quickly." So, the early Church lived in that expectation of the imminent return of the one who had come. And the Church's celebration of Advent historically has been a celebration of that expectation of the one who came, coming again, and Advent has been particularly the season in which we have thought about the movement of history and history's culmination and history's end events. And here we have reinterpreted that coming again, that second coming, so to speak, for we have come to acknowledge that an imminent return after 2000 years can hardly be compelling. Certainly that early interpretation of where the world was in the timeline of God erred, although understandably so.

David Hartman, the rabbi from Jerusalem, has re-interpreted the prophets' dream, as well, so that that shalom on earth, David Hartman says, is not necessarily some future time and place, but rather, the critique of every movement of history. Every human arrangement, every historical arrangement, every age, every epic, every moment comes under the judgment of that dream of shalom, and every human arrangement is shown to be inadequate compared to the intention of God according to the dream of the prophet.

But, here we are in another Advent season, making our way toward Christmas. What I'd like to do today and for the next couple of weeks is to have us think about Christmas as a mirror that reflects the nature of God. What kind of a God is reflected in the mirror of Christmas? From what we know about the event, what

kind of a God is revealed from the Christmas mystery? Think with me this morning about A Tale of Three Cities as we reflect on world history, its course, and perhaps its culmination.

Three Cities: Rome, obviously, the seat of imperial power, a city still today magnificent as evidenced by its ruins. Rome, who ruled the world as the ancient world had never been ruled before, ruled by the most powerful empire that the world had known. The Roman Empire. The Roman Emperor. Imperial Rome, on top of the world, its empire stretched far and wide, and it held peoples and tribes in subjection. It was the occupying power at the time of the birth of Jesus.

Luke tells us the story of Jesus in reference to Caesar Augustus, for it was Caesar Augustus who proclaimed an edict that all the world should be taxed, and that was the way by which Luke brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus. But, here in this far out province, the lives of people are implicated by the decree of an imperial ruler who lives in Rome.

Roman law, Roman order - it was a great civilization. There was much to commend it. It was, perhaps, the finest human arrangement in terms of government and rule and the ordering of society. Rome, famous for its law, famous for the magnificent civilization that arose under its aegis. Rome was an empire not without its own dreams and ideals. After Julius Caesar was assassinated, there ensued a fifteen-year civil war, a civil war which was bloody, indeed, but which culminated finally with Octavian coming to Rome in 29 before Christ as the sole ruler. Before that, the Roman poet, Virgil, had written in his *Fourth Eclogue* a tribute to Augustus, Caesar Augustus, who was one declared, on his birth, as a savior, as a son of God. In 1890, in Asia Minor in a little village, there was an inscription found, "To Augustus as the Son of God, the Savior of the World." Virgil had dreamed about the birth of one who would bring the world peace, and the Roman world began its new year, subsequently, on the 23th of September, which was the birth of Octavian who became Caesar Augustus. So, the Roman calendar was gathered around the birth of this one who was purported to be son of God. He was the great nephew of Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar had been elevated to deity. This one was understood as son of God, and the word savior was applied to him. And so, in 29 before Christ, there is one on the seat of authority in the Roman empire, one who is understood as son of God, Savior, a bringer of peace and wholeness to the brokenness of the world.

As I say, Rome, this gigantic empire, was not without its integrity, it was not without its idealism, it was not without its dream, and yet, it was the super power of the day and it was committed, above all, to the perpetuation of its preeminence and power. And so, when it came down to it, it may have a man of peace on the throne and, incidentally, the first official act of Caesar Augustus was to close the Temple of Janus, the double-faced god of war, and he dedicated a gigantic altar to peace, the Augustan Altar of Peace. So, again, it is not as though this people was without its ideal, its hope and its dream. It is not as though the Roman hierarchy

did not understand that which was good for humankind. But, when push came to shove, it was the Roman legions that ruled, and by military might and the power of the sword, Rome enforced the Roman peace, the Pax Romana. That's the irony, isn't it? This powerful, powerful human institution with high ideals enforced by the power of the legion and the sword.

I suppose you're already suspecting that I might suggest that Rome's situation in that ancient world 2000 years ago was not so different than our situation in our world in 2001. We, too, are the world's one great super power, and we, too, are a people of a high idealism. There's a kind of moralistic strain, even in our foreign policy. We are a people who engage in a military action and are more concerned, really, about humanitarian aid. All of the ambiguity of our present situation, eh? A mighty power with high ideals and humane concerns and yet, of course, if we would be honest, we, too, are a people like Rome whose hands are dirty, with alliances and coalitions with regimes who are oppressive of their own people, but good for our own preservation of power and preeminence.

Oh, the world is a messy place, and the human story is full of such ambiguity. Here we are, the world's great power, so reflective of Rome in the days of its glory, struggling, I suppose, with that tension between idealism and real politic, the rough and tumble of national, international affairs. Ah, 2001 - not so different than year one.

And there was Jerusalem, of course, a bit of a different situation and yet, also so reflective of the human situation. There a man named Herod who was both Jewish and Edomite, so he had Jacob and Esau in his veins – there Herod got himself into the good graces of Rome and was appointed governor in 47 before Christ and in 40 before Christ became king, King Herod the Great. And he was great. We're told the story of Herod having melted down his own personal gold in order to buy corn to feed people in time of famine. Another time of crisis, he remitted the taxes of the people. He was a builder; people came from the ancient world to examine the glories of Jerusalem, the building projects of Herod the Great. And Jerusalem was ruled well.

There was the other side of Herod, though. He was a paranoid individual, ruthless and brutal. Herod had his wife Alexandra and her mother put to death. When he came to power in 40, when he was crowned king, he had the Sanhedrin slaughtered just to remove the old guard, so to speak. Another time, 300 court officials were slaughtered at one fell swoop. He had his own eldest son murdered, and two others of his sons were murdered. Caesar August said it would be better to be Herod's pig than his son. And after his long, long rule, knowing that he had not endeared himself to the people, he retired to Jericho, knowing he was about to die, and he had the finest of Jerusalem arrested and imprisoned so that when he died, they could be put to death, because he said, "When Herod dies, no one will cry. But, when Herod dies, tears will flow." There's a nice fellow for you. That was Herod the Great.

Jerusalem. And Herod is so representative of those who are in power, who worry about keeping power, for when the magi came, inquiring about the birth of a king because they had seen his star, Matthew tells us that Herod was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem was frightened with him. You see, when you have an established order and when you are on top, you have always to worry about maintaining that order and preserving your position and your pre-eminence. So, Herod, this brutal, paranoid ruler, when he realized that the magi had gone home another way, simply had all the children two years and under slaughtered. We call it the “Slaughter of the Innocents.” A brutal act for the preservation of power and the removal of any possible threat to his authority.

And, of course, Jerusalem wasn’t only marked by that kind of civil king, but also entwined in the ruling establishment of Jerusalem was the Sadducean party, the high priestly party, and we know from the story of Jesus that when this prophet made his way and made his point, and proclaimed in the center of Jerusalem that which he believed to be reflective of the will of God for this people of God, it was the collaboration of the Herodian party and the Roman government, Pontius Pilate, that Jesus was killed. So, Jerusalem was that city, too, that knew in all of its dimensions that vying for earthly power, the political games that people play, the vying for position and the preserving of preeminence - that was Jerusalem in the days of the one who was born on Christmas.

I read from the Revelation to give a sense of the biblical story, the outcome of that kind of power play, for the 19th chapter of Revelation is that from which comes the Hallelujah Chorus. But, when you read the 19th chapter, you have to be shaken just a bit because there is such vengeance in that chapter, and what is being celebrated? Well, it is the devastation and the ending of Rome, called Babylon, the great harlot, the great whore. Babylon, standing for Rome, represents in the biblical perspective that whole gamut of human arrangement that is set on power, and the enforcement of rule by force and military might, economic domination, all sorts of domination systems, and in the 19th chapter of Revelation, she is overthrown and the smoke rises and there is this hallelujah celebration. And there is this great affirmation, “The Lord God Almighty reigns.” You can understand, perhaps, the vengeance, because this people has suffered. It has suffered terribly at the hands of imperial power, and so they rejoice in the dream of that ultimate overthrow because the revelation of John is again in that biblical tradition that believes finally Almighty God will bring it out right.

It is rather amazing to me, when I realize that that picture is in tension with the Christmas miracle, because that picture in Revelation is the kind of expression for that human desire for vengeance, and that human desire for God Almighty to take charge and to damn the darkness and to establish the righteous. And yet that’s not at all what I see in the Christmas miracle, because there is a third city – Bethlehem.

Micah speaks of Bethlehem, “Least of the tribes of Judah.” Little Bethlehem, from you will come a ruler and he will be a shepherd to his people, be a man of peace. Now, you can feel it coming. This is the typical sermon cant. This is the naive preacher’s talk, because Rome will be overthrown and Jerusalem will be devastated, but the one who comes out of the poverty and the obscurity of Bethlehem will be established as the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings. And yet, that Christmas miracle reveals a God who comes out of the most unexpected place, and in the most unexpected way, a God who is embodied and reflected in a human face and, for God’s sake, as a child.

But, do you see what I am trying to put before you? The paradox of the God reflected in the mirror of Christmas? The God reflected in the mirror of Christmas is not the God of Revelation’s almighty triumph. The God reflected in the Christmas mirror is a God of vulnerability, born as a child, become a man, crucified for God’s sake, crucified violently by the power structures, the human power structures of this world. The Christmas mirror reflects a God who is vulnerable, whose supreme revelation is in a human face and in the form of a child, because the revelation of Christmas at its heart is that human, historical arrangements will not finally prevail. They will prevail and prevail and persist and persist, but finally, they all come to nothing. And so, I talk naive preacher talk this morning, because we all know that finally, it is a power game. Finally, you can have humanitarian concerns, but the bottom line is still military might enforcing our will, preserving our position, and yet - Christmas is about a God who can be crucified, God embodied in a child. And you see, I am aware of how naive is this talk.

But, remember – Rome fell. Because no matter how strong you are, no matter how many legions, no matter how many swords, there comes a point in the human story when you tire of trying to preserve a position of preeminence. There comes a time in the human story when people worry, weary of protecting themselves and projecting themselves. There comes a time when every great power finally fades, sometimes in devastating fashion. And in the meantime, people have been consumed with the power game, with the preservation of preeminence and the perpetuation of position. And so, dear friends, 2001. We have fought the totalitarianism of Fascism under Hitler’s regime and prevailed, we have outlasted the Communist experiment under the USSR and we have prevailed, and we are engaged now in a war which will not be won by military might. We know that, don’t we? And we are a people who are at the top of our game and we know no people has ever stayed there. And from that third city, Bethlehem, came one who was like a shepherd, who was a man of peace, and that really is what Christmas reveals about the nature of God. God is love. Love can be crucified. Love is vulnerable. Love is patient and kind. And love never fails. Every other strategy finally will fail. Christmas reveals the God who will prevail – because love never fails – but who is the opposite of all of our human domination systems.

I'd like to have sent you out with a cozy little Christmas message this morning. Forgive me for that. But, there is enough for you to think about here to disrupt your whole Advent season.