

Love Talk: A Tale of Two Cities and a Rumor of Angels

Luke 2: 1-14; Micah 5: 2-5a

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Merry Christmas! It seems so natural to see you gathered before me with all the trimmings of the season, all the beautiful music, the evident warmth and joy of being with folks with whom there is such marvelous shared history and experience. Quite wonderful indeed!

For me, preparing for such an event has its own familiar feel. I never fit the old preacher stereotype of moving every five or six years and turning over the sermon barrel. Remaining in one place has meant revisiting again and again the same high holy days, the same seasons of the Christian year and needing to find something fresh to say. I have operated all these years on the theory that a sermon was meant for a concrete community at a particular moment in their life and the historical context of that moment. Over the years people would say, “You should publish your sermons” or “Christ Community should go on television.” I was never tempted. It has always been my passion to form and shape, live with and experience life in one particular community – the community of which we were a part during those three and a half decades of our life together.

Forgive an old man for a bit of nostalgia but, preparing for this worship experience, now that I’m retired gives me the luxury of going back and reviewing how the respective Festival Days were celebrated and it is those high points in the Christian year that provide a collage of the celebrations over all those years. I have enjoyed going back to file upon file – liturgies, prayers, sermons – to detect my own evolving understanding and the movement toward a full and rich liturgical worship experience which, together, we created.

One interesting dimension of such a review is to determine what was happening in my own grasp and experience of “The Story” as it brought to expression the events of Jesus – birth, ministry, passion and death, resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. We can all tell the stories – Christmas, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost – and the stories are rooted in a concrete historical life. Yet the story is woven of legend and myth, magic and miracle. How does one who lives in a Post-Enlightenment world marked by critical thinking find the meaning of the Story woven in myth and miracle?

That was a question we addressed years ago. You addressed it because I had to address it. I was nurtured and educated in a religious setting where the Story was taken literally – angels, stars, kings from the East, the manger, and shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. It took me years to understand the nature of story, of sign and symbol and many of you went on the journey with me.

I smiled as I took up a sermon of 12-28-97. The title tells a lot – “The Fairy Tale is True.” Obviously by that time – actually years earlier – I had been freed from a deadening biblical literalism. But we did not all emerge into that heady freedom at the same time. And what made me smile was a sentence in the sermon which told why I was reflecting on the theme – “because of a few conversations I’ve had with some of you who have wondered how to receive the Christmas story – a story that begins, “And it came to pass...” and is laced with angelic announcements accompanied by a heavenly choir, magi from the East following a brilliant star that comes to rest over a stable wherein lies a newborn child born to a virgin.”

I know exactly what was going on at Christmas, 1997; some of my people were struggling to hear the Story in a new way, fearing they would lose the heart warming sacred truth with which it was associated in their experience. We have all been there I think. Some emerge from the literalism of scriptural story more easily than others but that move to critical understanding is both necessary and a bit frightening.

As I go back over the years I find it fascinating to be reminded of the sacred journey we have been on.

If returning year after year to the same sacred celebrations brought its challenge to say something both significant and fresh, that possibility was aided by the fact that, although it was always the same Christmas or the same Easter, the moment of return was always in a new historical context. Current events often gave a contemporary relevance to the celebration. To cite just one example, on December 21, 1980, my sermon was “And It Came To Pass.” Those words traditionally introduce a story, perhaps one of our favorite traditional fairy tales. When you hear “And it came to pass,” you sit back and expect to hear a story. Already in 1980 I was suggesting that the Christmas story as told by St. Luke was such a story, introduced as it is in the King James Version with those words, “And it came to pass in those days...”.

But something happened two weeks earlier – December 8, 1980 – John Lennon was shot dead as he was about to enter The Dakota, the building in which he lived, in New York City. And the Sunday a week before I preached the sermon on December 21, millions of people around the world gathered to mourn John Lennon and observe ten minutes of silence at the request of Lennon’s wife, Yoko Ono. Over 100,000 gathered in Central Park. And what has all that to do with Christmas? Well, this was the young poet-singer who spoke and sang of peace

and love, who taught a whole generation to sing “Give Peace a Chance” which was heard that day at the Lincoln Memorial. This was the poet-singer who penned the lines we received on a Christmas card and have been shared with you before:

Imagine

By John Lennon

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try.
No hell below us,
Above us only sky.
Imagine all the people
Living for today...

Imagine there's no countries.
It isn't hard to do.
Nothing to kill or die for,
No religion too.
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can.
No need for greed or hunger,
A brotherhood of man.
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...

You may say I'm a dreamer,
But I'm not the only one.
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one.

The tremendous outpouring of grief for John Lennon made me wonder at Christmas, 1980, why my message of the Prince of Peace seemed so ineffectual. Even more, it caused me to become aware of a deep human longing if only it could be tapped into. In that sermon I wrote:

Could it be that within the human heart there is a huge void and emptiness that cries out to be filled with love, to be touched by grace?

Thus, a current event shaped my experience and my preaching of the Christmas gospel in 1980 and, I would add, impacted my whole understanding of the human situation to which the Gospel was addressed.

And so, looking back over the years of our shared experience of Christmas, I came to a renewed awareness of how together we negotiated that passage from biblical literalism to a critical understanding of the Bible as the storybook of an ancient people in which were embedded the eternal questions of the human heart, and, secondly, how contemporary historical experience brings out ever fresh dimensions of the story.

Over many Christmases past I entitled sermons in such a way that the nature of the Christmas Gospel as I understood it was reflected. For example, “The Fairy Tale Is True”, “Love Talk”, “A Rumor of Angels”, and “It Came To Pass...”. It is a beautiful story, as I indicated above, woven with miracle and myth, laced with legend and illumined by starlight, narrated by angels to fearful shepherds. And what we had come to see over many years was that the profound meaning embroidered with all the marks of story was the deepest truth of our human existence. The meaning that comes to expression in the Christmas Gospel is that the whole cosmic drama reflects a bias for life and the grain of the universe is Love. One Advent series leading up to the Christmas celebration was entitled “God in the Mirror of Christmas.” I remember that series as a breakthrough for me. No new discoveries about the Story as such; it was just that what our biblical tradition was saying about the nature of God struck me so powerfully – a child as the expression of God, God set forth in the vulnerability of a child, God revealed in a human face.

And when we speak of God we are using a symbol for what is ultimate. Paul Tillich’s famous phrase – “The Ground of Being” – captures, to some degree, that to which we are pointing. The more we learn about this evolving cosmos and emerging reality the more we realize it is a whole continuing to come to ever fuller expression and we are the conscious products of that process, bringing to it awareness. So could we speak of God as the Generating Creative Center?

Then the Christmas Gospel would be saying that at its Creative, Generative Center there is a bias for life, the vulnerability of love, the heart of compassion. That is an attempt to say something about the nature of reality. There is no scientific proof. We are speaking of a fundamental trust, a profound hope, a daring declaration concerning the nature of the cosmic process.

No proof possible. Yet there is evidence everywhere that love and trust and compassion are the ingredients of a wonderful world where life flourishes and joy abounds. And the contrary is also easily documented: hate, mistrust and heartlessness drain the joy, destroy the peace and create fear and insecurity in the human heart.

So this is where I come out from my nostalgic journey to Christmases past:

We moved from biblical literalism in which we strained to document whether there was a decree sent out by Caesar Augustus when Quirinius was Governor of

Syria and whether there was actually some astronomical phenomenon that might have been the Star in the East and soon, to an appreciation of the genre of Story in which the miracle and myth beautifully expressed become the vehicle for the declaration of a profound understanding of cosmic reality and human wellbeing – a vision of the nature deep down in things and the secret of human flourishing in the presence of the sacred mystery who is the creative generating source of being.

Further, we realize how, although every Christmas celebration is the same in its story and manner of expression – carols and trimmings, parties and pageants – what is happening in the world brings out fresh nuances of the Story. It is to this historical moment in our nation's history that I now turn.

I entitled my meditation "Love Talk: A Tale of Two Cities and a Rumor of Angels." Let me move to the Tale of Two Cities – not Paris and London as in Charles Dickens' famous novel but rather two cities that played a key role in the Christmas story – Rome and Bethlehem. I suspect you know me well enough to have a sense of what I want to say about those two cities that would address our contemporary situation in our nation and in the world this Christmas.

Rome, of course, was the seat of the Roman Empire – the greatest ruling empire the world had ever known and still one of the greatest ever. I need not go into a thorough review of the greatness and the grandeur that was Rome. We are familiar with that history in its many dimensions – Roman law, Roman roads, Roman legions that pacified that ancient world at the time of Jesus' birth.

Luke uses the decree of Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered to bring Joseph and the very pregnant Mary to Bethlehem in Judea from their home in Nazareth, so that the birth of Jesus would be in Bethlehem, the City of David, thus fulfilling the prophetic promise. The registration reflected good Roman government – registration creating the order on which Roman rule was exercised and taxes collected. I remember in college or seminary being referred to a book by David R. Breed, *The Preparation of the World for Christ* (1918), which moves through the history of Israel, Greek civilization and to the Roman unification of the world – Israel's hope, Greek language, Roman roads over which traveled Roman legions effecting the Pax Romana – The Roman Peace. Breed's point, of course, was that the development of the ancient world in its various stages was God's providential preparation of the world for the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, whose gospel would be proclaimed by St. Paul traveling those Roman roads to the far-flung territories of the Empire.

What was missing in this treatise was any acknowledgment that the Roman legions were the empire's agent of power, of military might by which the ancient world was subdued by Imperial Rome. The *Pax Romana* was an enforced peace on subject peoples. In the case of Rome and I believe every world empire, military might was the requisite.

This is not to say that there was not positive virtue in Imperial Rome and, indeed, a desire for peace in that ancient world. In his great work, *On Being a Christian* (1974, English translation 1976), Hans Küng juxtaposes the peace of Rome and the peace Jesus incarnated:

In the year 42 or 41 before Jesus' birth, at the beginning of the fifteen years of grievous civil war following the murder of Julius Caesar, the Roman poet Virgil in his famous Fourth Eclogue announced the birth of a world saviour. Was this an expression of hope in Caesar's great nephew and adopted son Octavius and his house? In any case, when Octavius finally returned to Rome in the year 29, as sole ruler, after the victory over Anthony and Cleopatra, his first official act was to close the temple of Janus, the double-faced god of war. And "Augustus Divi Filius" – "Son of the divine one" (Of Caesar elevated after his death to be a state god), translated in the Greek East as "Son of God" – did everything possible to realize the hopes nourished by Virgil of The Utopia of an imminent reign of peace: Pax Romana, Pax Augusta, sealed with the consecration of the gigantic Ara Pacis Augustae, the Augustan altar of peace, in the year 9 B.C. In the same year (according to the famous inscription found in Priene in Asia Minor and later elsewhere) the "gospel" (*euangelion*, "good news") of the birthday of the "Saviour" and "God" who had now appeared – Caesar Augustus – was proclaimed in the East to the whole world: the saviour who had brought to the broken world new life, happiness, peace, fulfillment of ancestral hopes, salvation. (p. 438)

There is no need to write off the noble aspirations of Caesar Augustus and his contemporaries. Has there not always been a dream of peace and wellbeing in the human heart, a longing for safety and security? Nonetheless, the peace Augustus desired and Rome for a long period of history provided is a different peace than that to which the way of Jesus leads. Küng is clear.

It is in fact obvious that even the apparently idyllic Christmas story has very real social-critical (and, in the broadest sense, political) implications and consequences. This is a peace opposed to the political savior and the political theology of the Imperium Romanum which provided ideological support for the imperial peace policy: it is a true peace which cannot be expected where divine honors are paid to a human being and an autocrat... We need only compare Luke's Christmas Gospel with the Gospel already mentioned of Augustus at Priene to see how the roles here are exchanged. The end of wars, worthwhile life, common happiness in a word, complete well-being, man's "salvation" and the world's – are expected no longer from the overpowerful Roman Caesars but from this powerless, harmless child. (p. 452f)

Obviously, I use Rome and Bethlehem as symbols of two contrasting kinds of peace, of two contrasting visions of the nature of a peaceful world – the one represented by the Roman Emperor however noble, however much desiring peace in the world, and Jesus or the Way of Jesus bringing peace of quite another kind.

On Christmas Eve, 1994, I used the same texts as this evening – Micah 5:5, “...and he shall be the one of peace” and Luke 2:15, “...and on earth peace.” I cite the 1994 Christmas Eve meditation because I had pointed to the difference between the peace of empire and the peace of Jesus and made reference to what was happening on the global scene – the Balkan tragedy, the, at that time, fragile, relative peace in Bosnia after all the bloodshed. I went on to say,

Luke was writing of the birth of One, from the other end of the story, because, remember, Luke wrote the birth after the death. Luke wrote of the birth after the resurrection. Luke knew the hell that Jesus had gone through, but Luke’s gospel of Jesus, which speaks of peace in the beginning, is a peace that was a peace to be secured only in the Way of Jesus. It was the Way of Jesus, as opposed to the way of Rome. It was a peace that was based on the end of all human domination. That, Luke was telling us in his gospel, was the peace that came through Jesus Christ. It was not the peace enforced by the power of Rome, but the peace that comes from God, to those who follow the Way of Jesus.

I referred to the then current conflict, the human suffering, the terrible violence and killing and related the experience of a few of us who had toured Europe that fall and visited the Normandy beaches and the D-Day museum at Caen, France, where a film graphically depicted the terror of D-Day fifty years before. The day we visited the Beaches it was beautiful, so calm and peaceful. One could hardly imagine the horror of 1944. I said,

A couple of months ago I visited the shores of Normandy, the fiftieth anniversary of the scarred earth where that horrendous battle was fought. A week ago, perhaps some of you saw as well the special by David Brinkley on the Battle of the Bulge, fifty years ago. Did you hear in that special a recording of the voice of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who said fifty years ago at Christmas, “It is not easy to wish the nation a Merry Christmas this year, nor to those who are standing for us around the world.” It was a world at war, and a terrible price was exacted. There are those that suggest that maybe the past fifty years were better. But were they? Just five years ago we were so euphoric at this time of year because the Berlin wall had fallen and we thought that maybe the world was taking a significant step toward peace. The collapsing of an impasse of terror that held the world at bay for fifty years evaporating, allowed these ancient feuds to surge forth again. So in 1994 at Christmas we speak of the peace of Jesus. But there is no peace. You see, we think of peace in terms of the

balance of power and of political possibilities, but there is only one way to peace – it is the way of human community. It is by the ending of all human domination.

I have pointed out in this meditation that each returning Christmas, while replete with all the accoutrements that we so much love, nevertheless has its own special and unique aspect determined by what was happening in the world at that time. This meditation takes its cue not from some global happening at present but rather from my own personal experience of reflection on the gospel of peace and the history of our own nation in the century past to the present time.

This is not something new. As I have indicated, it has been my practice over the decades of ministry at Christ Community to relate the gospel to world happenings. But recently reading a book authored by James Carroll entitled *House of War* has made a deep impact on me. The subtitle is “The Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power.”

James Carroll is the author of *Constantine’s Sword*, a history of the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish people and I used it for a Wednesday evening class a few years ago. It is an excellent historical study. *House of War* even exceeds *Constantine’s Sword* in my opinion. I have seldom been more engrossed in a book or more impacted. I suspect that is because Carroll narrates the history through which I’ve lived – events I remember from the time, people in government and on the world scene with whom I am familiar, crisis points, breakthroughs that were celebrated. He is eight years younger than I am but what he recounts really begins with World War II and continues to the first years of George W. Bush’s administration, which means to 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Carroll’s review of that history has a unique perspective in that his father was a FBI agent working for J. Edgar Hoover, and then was appointed to be the first Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, made an Army General and located in the Pentagon. The Carrolls were a strong Irish Catholic family and James, growing up in the shadow of the Pentagon, decided to enter the Roman Catholic priesthood, which delighted his father.

It was during his seminary years that the popular revolt against the Vietnam War arose. He identified with that protest, being greatly influenced by the Catholic protest movement led by the Berrigan brothers. Carroll’s identification with the anti-war movement led to a serious break with his Brigadier General father, recounted in an earlier book, *An American Requiem: God, My Father and the War That Came Between Us*.

I cannot here do more than attempt to identify what so deeply impacted me reading *House of War*. As the history of the past six decades was recounted, I came to see how we have come to our present state of global empire. Earlier I spoke of a certain idealism and hope for peace that marked the Roman Empire.

In the case of our own nation, that is certainly true as well. There have always been generations of good and decent persons leading our nation, genuinely wanting peace. And it is true as well, as our President said in his Oslo speech as he received the Nobel Peace Prize, America has carried the heavy burden of liberating people and ensuring peace in the world.

But that is only one side of the story. And this is where James Carroll's documentation of the disastrous rise of American power is so powerful, illuminating and distressing. Through historical circumstances we evolved into a powerful nation with a military that has become the shaping force of American policy. We are a military state upon which depend our economy, our industry, even our great research universities.

Let me refer to just two critical moments in the history through which we have lived. The first moment was what to do with the newly discovered nuclear power. Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote a memorandum to President Truman. Carroll writes:

It was another of those events dated September 11, each one the center of a world in collision with other worlds. The impact of such collisions is our subject. On September 11, 1945, four years to the day after the groundbreaking of the Pentagon, fifty-six years to the day before the Al Qaeda attack on the Pentagon, less than a month after Japan's surrender, and just over a month after the detonation of the Nagasaki bomb, Stimson composed an urgent "Memorandum for the President," which began, "Subject: Proposed Action for Control of Atomic Bombs."

First Stimson told the president what the dawning of the nuclear age meant:

If the atomic bomb were merely another though more devastating military weapon to be assimilated into our pattern of international relations, it would be one thing. We could then follow the old custom of secrecy and nationalistic military superiority relying on international caution to prescribe [*sic*] future use of the weapon as we did with gas. But I think the bomb instead constitutes merely a first step in a new control by man over the forces of nature too revolutionary and dangerous to fit into the old concepts. I think it really caps the climax of the race between man's growing technical power for destructiveness and his psychological power of self-control and group-control – his moral power. If so, our method of approach to the Russians is a question of the most vital importance in the evolution of human progress... The crux of the problem is Russia.

Carroll comments further:

"To put the matter concisely," Stimson wrote, he proposed that the United States take immediate steps to "enter into an arrangement with the

Russians, the general purpose of which would be to control and limit the use of the atomic bomb.” He suggested that by bringing the Soviets into our confidence, they would have reason to believe it when Americans said that “we would stop work on any further improvement in, or manufacture of, the bomb as a military weapon, provided the Russians and the British would do likewise.” This meant, and Stimson proposed it, that Washington would “impound what bombs we now have in the United States provided the Russians and the British would agree with us that in no event will they or we use a bomb as an instrument of war unless all three governments agree to that use.” Give up the secret. Give up the monopoly. Give up sovereignty over use. Give up control of existing bombs. Stimson, in the cover letter that accompanied this memo, summed up his proposal by using the word “share” twice. (p. 113 f)

Carroll relates how Stimson’s grasp of the situation with Russia in light of the atomic bomb was countered by Secretary of State James Byrnes. Carroll’s account is so fascinating because he gives us a glimpse behind the scenes from the perspective of history as to the tensions and arguments that raged at the time. Writing of Stimson, Carroll relates,

So now he warned that relations with Moscow “may be perhaps irretrievably embittered by the way in which we approach the solution of the bomb with Russia. For if we fail to approach them now and merely continue to negotiate with them, having this weapon rather ostentatiously on our hip, their suspicion and their distrust of our purposes and motives will increase.” This reference to the atomic bomb “ostentatiously on our hip” is a tip off that this memo was essentially an argument against fiercely anti-Soviet positions then being taken by Secretary of State Byrnes, who had already proven to be something of a nemesis. Stimson had, the week before, criticized the way Byrnes was preparing for an upcoming meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers in London: “Byrnes [is] very much against any attempt to cooperate with Stalin. His mind is full of the problems with the coming meeting of the foreign ministers and he looks to having the presence of the bomb in his pocket, so to speak, as a great weapon to get through the thing he has.”

Very much against Byrnes, in one of the most remarkable statements ever made by an American statesman, Stimson presumed to assert in his September 11 letter to Truman, “The chief lesson I have learned in a long life is that the only way you can make a man trustworthy is to trust him; and the surest way to make him untrustworthy is to distrust him and show him your distrust.

I conclude the first critical moment by underscoring these last lines – the matter of trust. Trust or fear leading to mistrust; fear that often blooms into paranoia and a world community market by paranoia is a dangerous place.

Do you sense that the whole disastrous tragedy of the Cold War could have been avoided? Do you sense that at that critical moment in the history of the twentieth century trust could have changed the impasse of terror through which we lived on the brink of disaster?

One more critical moment – the breaking down of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. We remember it well – the euphoria, the relief, the high hopes for a world at peace. From James Carroll filling in the background of the Reagan/Gorbachev encounters. I was struck by the stature of the Russian leader. It was he, not Mr. Reagan that created the possibility and effected the reality of the end of the Cold War. But this I point to because for the United States it was another missed opportunity – a missed opportunity to disarm the nuclear weapons that both sides stockpiled because of that earlier missed opportunity when we could have averted that arms race before it began. Russia wanted to disarm; we did not.

Why trouble you with this history and the rise of American power at Christmas? Simply because it is Rome and Bethlehem all over again. I have been critical of American imperial designs for some time, especially since the rise to power and prominence of the neo-conservative movement that advocated the unipolar world, the United States, the one world superpower doing whatever was necessary to maintain its preeminence. But I've never seen before so clearly the creeping militarism that has led to our present state.

It is Rome all over again; the peace ensured by force of arms. Multitudes of good people, well-meaning people become captives of the drive towards empire maintaining "peace" by "military might."

That to which I point involves such a complex of philosophical, political reasoning and argument. I suspect we could get into a good free-for-all if I allowed an open mike; but I am not interested in argument or debate. I am not interested in scoring points or winning an argument. I have the privilege by your good grace of bearing witness in the beauty of this Christmas season to my deepest intuition, *my* highest aspiration. It is this: peace on earth will not be finally accomplished by political strategy or military power. Peace on earth will come only in the Way of Jesus, a way of non-violence – not pacifism, a passive response to one's world – but non-violent resistance to evil and darkness, and positive offering of trust, of grace, of love, of compassion, of being willing to die rather than be untrue to those virtues.

The vulnerability of a child as a mirror of the heart of God – a child in obscure Bethlehem a sign of a Love which Imperial Rome and the great Caesar Augustus could never vanquish. Only such love incarnate in earth's multitude holds the possibility of Peace on Earth – indeed of a human future.

Will I have another Christmas in which to bear my witness? Perhaps not. Let then this be my last witness and plea: the Way of Jesus is the only way to peace, freedom from fear, freedom to live in love and grace.

References:

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Hans Küng. *On Being a Christian*. Published in 1974; English translation, 1976.