

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY
A Christmas Eve Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
Stanford Memorial Church
December 24, 2012

We gather here tonight on Christmas Eve to hear the “good news of great joy for all the people” as described in the Gospel of Luke.ⁱ It’s all about a baby born in the town of Bethlehem who’s proclaimed to be the Messiahⁱⁱ and the Prince of Peace.ⁱⁱⁱ This was hard to fathom two thousand years ago, because this child’s people, the Jews, were suffering under the occupation and oppression of Emperor Caesar Augustus’s Roman legions. The poor and middle class were being forced to register in a census and being taxed heavily to support the occupiers and the local upper classes,^{iv} and Syria was in the news (or soon to be in the news) as a place of revolt against the regime of Governor Quirinius.^v But perhaps “good news of great joy for all the people” is also hard to fathom in December 2012 in America, as we face our own questions of proper taxation close to the fiscal cliff and as violence continues in the Middle East in places like Syria. Both then and now politics were and are all wrapped up in ordinary people’s lives and in how to tell the story of salvation. And children themselves were and are at risk, whether in Newtown, Connecticut, or at the hands of King Herod, who reportedly “killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under”^{vi} after Jesus’s birth.

Christmas represents the great celebratory claim that the “good news of great joy for all the people” comes in the form of what professor of comparative religion, Huston Smith, describes as “a Jewish carpenter who...was born in a stable, was executed as a criminal at age thirty-three, never traveled more than ninety miles from his birthplace, owned nothing, attended no college, marshaled no army, and...did his only writing in the sand.”^{vii} Christmas can be for us the great celebratory moment of joy that the world is ultimately redeemable by love – the kind of

unconditional love represented by parents like Mary and Joseph for a newborn baby first of all, but in the longer run the kind of unconditional love that Jesus modeled, reaching out not only to one's neighbors but also ultimately to one's enemies as well, even as he was torturously executed on a cross at the hands of the Roman empire.

Let's remember this Christmas story in a bit more detail now – that we might be caught up and personally transformed in the “good news of great joy for all the people” that it describes.

Caesar Augustus, great nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar, was the most powerful person on earth at the time of Jesus's birth. Roman domination stretched from the island of Britain in the west, well into Asia in the east. Jesus was born in a largely irrelevant corner of the empire in a little town that few had heard of. In turn, his family was so poor and inconsequential that no one took notice of their arrival in town or helped a pregnant woman find a place to stay. Mary ended up giving birth in a stable. What could this birth of an insignificant baby in this insignificant outpost of the empire possibly mean to Caesar Augustus? Nothing, of course. What does Caesar Augustus mean to us today, two thousand years later? Virtually nothing, except that one of the summer months still bears his name. What does Jesus mean to us today as we celebrate his birthday once again in this church? He provides an enduring vision of how to live a fulfilled and meaningful life, a moral understanding of how to treat others with compassion, a social discernment of how to put those with least ahead of those with much more -- and in so doing how to create a beloved community for all. Jesus teaches us that our spiritual, inner life is infinitely greater than our material, outward life. Worldly power comes and goes, but the power that emanates from this poor baby's birth lasts forever.^{viii}

I find it fascinating that the town in which he was born, Bethlehem, etymologically means “house of bread.”^{ix} Jesus is later known for feeding bread to five thousand hungry people

(as reported in all four gospels)^x and for eating a last supper of bread and wine with his disciples -- then asking them to remember him through the ritual eating of bread^{xi} that we've come to call communion in which we'll participate tonight. According to the gospel writer John, Jesus calls himself "the living bread" and "the bread of life."^{xii} Whoever comes to him will never be hungry.^{xiii}

As a biblical commentary I use puts it: "This is the story of the birth of a new kind of king. The birth reveals a new world order, a world not under Caesar but under the direction of God's design for the redemption of all peoples. In this world, God's word is heard by the humble. There is a place even for shepherds. There is hope for the oppressed, and those who heard what God is doing were filled with joy. God has not forgotten us or abandoned us to the brokenness we have created. The story of Christmas, therefore, is both an announcement of hope and a call to humility."^{xiv}

This was all brought home to me recently in a short story I discovered by Eleanor Roosevelt, entitled *Christmas, 1940*. It was published in the Christmas week edition of *Liberty Magazine* in December 1940. Almost a half century later, her son Elliott Roosevelt produced a foreword to the story in which he explained that when it was written, a year before the Pearl Harbor attack which brought America into the Second World War, "Hitler's armies had overrun most of Europe...Britain, holding out alone, had been badly hurt by incessant air attacks...Japan occupied much of China, and the final defeat of China seemed imminent. Indeed, it seemed that winter that destruction of civilization and the final enslavement of all mankind was within reach." Elliott Roosevelt explained that, "My mother was afraid. Many people were. We feared for humanity. What was more, many families had something very personal to fear: that their sons would have to fight on the battlefields of a war that had already proven terribly costly in human

life.” So Eleanor Roosevelt wrote a little story about her religious faith and her confidence in humankind, for “she believed it was God’s purpose that we should love and help our neighbors – an element of her faith that her own life exemplified with rare beauty.” Her story was set in the Netherlands after it had been occupied by the Nazis. It told of faith in the triumph, once again, of Jesus over the powers of Caesar in the twentieth century.^{xv}

A 7 year-old girl, Marta, and her mother, are at home on a cold and snowy night with a fire burning in the hearth. Marta asks her mother to tell her the story of Christmas, 1939. Her father had been mobilized as a soldier guarding the border, but he was allowed to come home for the holiday. They had a wonderful Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, talking and eating and playing and exchanging gifts. He had to leave to go back to the border right after Christmas, saying to Marta, “Take good care of mother until I come back.”

But he never came back. They learned in a telegram that he’d died. Marta began talking to the Christ child in Mary’s arms in the painting in their church as if they were both real, explaining what it was like now for her to meet children on the road near her house who spoke a strange language, made fun of her, and insisted that her country was now theirs. She described to the baby Jesus how sometimes there was nothing to eat in her house and how hard and long her mother had to work now, without any time to play with Marta.

On Christmas Eve of 1940, Marta asked her mother if they could light the one candle left from last year’s feast and put it in the window “so that the light will shine out for the Christ child to see His way.” Her mother agreed. Then, “Marta wanted to see how far the light would shine out into the night, so she... [got] into her wooden shoes...put her shawl over her head, opened the door, and slipped out into the night. The wind was blowing around her and she could hardly stand up. She took two or three steps and looked back at the window. She could see the

twinkling flame of the candle, and while she stood watching it, she was conscious of a tall figure in a dark cloak standing beside her.”

He asked what she was doing and Marta responded, “I came out to make sure that the Christ child’s candle would shine out to guide His footsteps to our house. “You must not believe in any such legend,” remonstrated the tall dark man. There is no Christ child. That is a story which is told for the weak. It is ridiculous to believe that a little child could lead the people of the world, a foolish idea claiming strength through love and sacrifice. You must grow up and acknowledge only one superior, he who dominates the rest of the world through fear and strength.” Marta didn’t find this very convincing, since she found so much personal comfort through her conversations with the Christ child. She wondered if this might be a bad man who had “something to do with her father’s going away and not coming back or with her mother’s worrying so much and working so hard.”

Marta then invited him inside her house, where he addressed her mother: “Madam, you have taught this child a foolish legend. Why is she burning a candle in the hope that the Christ child will come?” Marta’s mother answered in a low voice, “To those of us who suffer, that is a hope we may cherish. Under your power there is fear, and you have created a strength before which people tremble. But on Christmas Eve strange things happen and new powers are sometimes born.” She went on: “Where you are, there are power and hate and fear of people, one of another. Here...there is the Christ child. The Christ child taught love...He loved His family, the poor, the sinners, and He tried to bring out in each one the love for Him and for each other...”

The story ends with the man leaving the house, engulfed again in the dark and the howling wind, consumed himself in feelings of greed and personal ambition. Looking back at

the house, though, he sees the little child's candle shining in the window, and he can sense that it's a symbol of salvation in the world, a symbol of hope and peace. But he's drawn back to the luxury of power and ends up turning away from the light in the window that's such a source of genuine strength for Marta and her mother.^{xvi}

1940 was a harder time indeed than ours is today, and yet it was the Christmas "good news of great joy for all the people" that kept Eleanor Roosevelt and the mother-daughter characters of her story going. May each of us find such strength and solace tonight and in the new year to come. May we be certain as the poor shepherds were that night of yore. May we see a light in the darkness. May we follow the star of love and compassion wherever it goes.^{xvii}

Amen.

NOTES

ⁱ Luke 2:10.

ⁱⁱ Luke 2:11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 9:6.

^{iv} Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), p. 355.

^v Erich S. Gruen, "The Expansion of the Empire under Augustus" in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume X: The Augustan Empire, 43 BC – AD 69*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 157.

^{vi} Matthew 2:16.

^{vii} Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 317.

^{viii} *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), Vol. VIII, pp. 48-50.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 50.

^x Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:5-15.

^{xi} Luke 22:14, 19-20 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-25; compare Matthew 26:20,26-29 and Mark 14:17,22-25.

^{xii} John 6:35, 48, 51.

^{xiii} John 6:35.

^{xiv} *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 67.

^{xv} Elliott Roosevelt, "Foreword" to Eleanor Roosevelt, *Christmas 1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 7-17.

^{xvi} Eleanor Roosevelt, *Christmas 1940*, pp. 19-61.

^{xvii} "The First Noel," *New English Hymnal*, (Canterbury Press, 1986), No. 36.