

Our Place in the Story

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First Parish in Brookline

My friends, this is not exactly the sermon I planned this past week. “Play it safe,” the wise ones told me, “go pastoral on Christmas Eve, especially in your first year.” And I tried, my friends, I really tried. As I said in my Facebook post this morning, I went to sleep with a decent pastoral sermon, and I woke up feeling prophetic. And it could have been fine if I hadn’t watched the news or listened to my more radical minister colleagues. I had some good thoughts, some soothing words, some gentle inspiration. But this season, this holiday, this story, on some level, it just devastates me.

If you are a parent or love children or feel for the marginalized among us, for immigrants at our borders, for people anywhere running scared from violence, for those impoverished by the injustices of our society, this story, this Christmas story, well, it is devastating.

My friend assured me: “People just want to be loved at Christmastime, they want to be told sweet and comforting things, to be soothed; because of what’s on the news, because of what’s going on all around them. They don’t need to have it in their faces...not at Christmas.” And that may be true...for some of us.

But yesterday, yesterday, we lit the fourth candle of advent, the candle of truth, and if I’m not true to myself, if we are not true to the meaning at the center of this story, then there is no way for us to be soothed. No amount of soothing will do.

Because, for us, it also really *is* about what part we play in the story, who we identify with. Who *we* would have been back then, in the tiny village of Bethlehem, if we heard news of yet one more child, born in poverty, to undistinguished parents, in a nearby barn?

Would we, the humble shepherds, leave our flocks, our livelihood, and walk through the cold night into town to find him? Or we, the powerful Magi, leave the comfort and luxuries of home to travel to a distant village on the strength of prophecy and the trail of a star? Or we, the innkeeper, harassed by demands for rooms, would we take pity on this couple, maybe against our own better judgement? Or we, the townspeople, puzzling over the local news, or some version of the latest Roman tyrant, what, if anything, would we have done?

And who are we today, as we hear of families huddled in makeshift shelters at our border, with babies born in the humblest of circumstances, and parents hoping for a better life than what they left behind? Who are we right now; what is our role in this time?

People here have heard me say this before, but sometimes, sometimes you just can’t get away from the message that is chasing you. Sometimes the message is all that there is. And there is just no getting around it, the Christmas message is not an easy or comfortable one, it is a challenge, an in-your-face, where were you, which role did you play, and what are you doing now, challenge.

Because when people ask: “What would Jesus do?” that’s a rhetorical question, right? It’s really no question at all; we know the answer. Jesus would be at the border, Jesus would be at the demonstrations, risking arrest, marching for peace, shouting for justice, leading the call. For most of his days, this sometime carpenter was crystal clear on what he would do. Jesus was mostly not a quiet, contemplative teacher. He certainly wasn’t a Christian; he was a radical Jew. Jesus knew how his story ended and we know that, too. And if you came tonight hoping for a comforting Christmas message, if you came to take that to your armchair by the fire, well, I’m sorry, dear friends, you *may* have come to the wrong place.

I woke this morning to the memory of Maria, the woman in the photo that went viral in the last weeks, of her running from tear gas with her twin little girls. It’s true, my friends. Our military, our border patrol, tear gassed women and children, who had walked hundreds of miles to escape domestic violence, gang terror, to keep their families together, to have a chance at some version—however limited—of the life that most of us take for granted. Here in America, land of the free, with liberty and justice for all.

Because of that photo, dozens of lawyers intervened, and I learned that Maria and her girls made it to safety here, for now anyway. But there are hundreds of Marias and their children at our border, huddled in makeshift shelters, waiting for their chance to enter in. Hoping for a miracle, not so unlike that miracle some 2000 years ago, when the Magi went home by another way and threw Herod off the trail.

My daughter sent me an article this morning—she knows me pretty well. It’s about a church in the Netherlands, which has been holding a nonstop service, aimed at keeping an Armenian family from being deported, since October 26th. That’s 1400 hours! Under Dutch law, police officers are not permitted to enter a church while a religious service is taking place. So, hundreds of pastors and volunteers have been leading services. Amazingly, this service has become something of a pilgrimage for people in the Netherlands—they are now issuing tickets to services and live-streaming them. The church is pursuing a number of legal avenues to help the family, who have been encouraged by the full attendance at the services. But they are, understandably, still hoping for their Christmas miracle.

My friends, it is time now, it is actually past time, to live out our parts in the Christmas story, to open our doors and our hearts to our neighbors at our border, to precious children and families living in fear, all over the world. Dear, dear friends, it is time, it is way past time, to use all of our energy and our resources, and work tirelessly to rid our country of the hatred and evil that pits citizens against each other for their race, their religion, or any other differences.

And it is time my friends, it is way, way past time, to ensure that every child, every holy babe, can be born into a life, whether in Yemen or Syria or Central Africa or anywhere on this planet, with every chance to grow in safety, and thrive in peace. That no child feels the need to flee from violence, to hide from threats, to be threatened with separation from their families. It is time, it is way, way past time.

On this night that is holy for so many, let us be resolute, steadfast in our commitment to each other, to every child that is born, no matter how lowly their beginnings. It is time for us to be able to look into the eyes of our own children and assure them that we have done all that we can every day to make sure that every child has all that they need and that this planet itself will endure.

There are no bad or wrong parts to play in this story. Of course, we didn't mention Herod or Caesar Augustus, those are very dark roles, and we might have some thoughts about who we would cast right now. But for the rest of us, whatever role we see for ourselves, let's claim it, let's live into it, and lift it up with all of the love and devotion that this season demands.

For the hopeful families at our border, the beloved families living in poverty, the precious children struggling to have their basic needs met. As much as the shepherds loved their flocks, as powerfully as the magi felt a pull to that stable, even with the grudging generosity of the innkeeper, let's not stay inside our homes as people may have done, living under a repressive empire, forced to pay taxes they couldn't afford, not daring to share with unexpected guests. Let's let the spirit of Christmas flood our lives with love and tenderness, and let our hearts break open for all whose lives are shattered and broken and yearning for a better chance.

Times are hard right now, dear ones, and they're likely to get worse before they get better—we don't need the media to tell us that. But we have each other, we have this place, and all of these good people. We know who we are, and we know who we can be; we know what is asked of us.

May you have love and peace this holiday season, beloveds, and may you play the part for which you were born, living out the goodness of your true nature. May all children and families everywhere have safety and peace. All this we ask tonight in the name of a child born long, long ago, who asks nothing more from us but to live as he did, in the light of hope, of peace, of truth, and, above all, of love.

Amen and blessed be.