

## OCCUPY BETHLEHEM

Advent 4: Revelation of the mystery

*Luke 1:26-55*

Presbyterian pastor and poet Johnstone Patrick,  
wrote a thought-provoking, yet simple, 4-line poem:

Along the pathway of the stars  
we toil toward the Moon and Mars.  
Good God! Have we lost our mind  
in leaving Bethlehem behind?

I've decided that one of the greatest tragedies  
about how Christmas has evolved over the centuries,  
is that collectively, the Christian church  
has left Bethlehem behind.

We have left behind some of the essential elements of this story.  
To the point we have nearly forgotten it.  
The challenge I want to place before us this morning,  
is not only to *remember* what we lost in Bethlehem,  
but to go back to it.  
And to stay there. To put up our tents.  
To Occupy Bethlehem.

And yes, "Occupy Bethlehem"  
is a not-so-subtle reference to current events.  
The now worldwide Occupy movement  
is only three months old this weekend,  
having begun Sept. 17 on Wall Street.  
And while I won't devote much time trying to interpret  
or parse out what that very diverse movement is about,  
and what the protestors are trying to accomplish,  
they do have at least one thing in common with my sermon.  
They are trying to say there is something wrong with the status quo.  
And that not only is it *possible*,  
but it is positive and hopeful,  
to open up a conversation about how we *got* to where we are,  
and whether there isn't some truth, some moral imperative,  
that our society is neglecting, to its own detriment.

This morning, I want to suggest that our society  
often neglects the truth about Bethlehem.  
That we *all*, including the church, have left behind  
the moral imperatives imbedded in this wonderful story.  
I say, let's start a movement, to Occupy Bethlehem again.

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So first, let's just re-visit Bethlehem,  
to discover what we might need to occupy,  
what we need to sit with for a while,  
and ponder,  
and discuss with each other outside our tents.  
And by "revisiting Bethlehem"  
I really mean to revisit the whole Christmas story,  
not just what actually happened in that city.

This is not the story it has come to represent in popular culture.  
It is *not*, by any stretch of the imagination,  
quaint, or picturesque, or serene.  
Just *forget* about the Christmas story  
as brought to you by Hallmark, and Currier and Ives.  
Go ahead and leave *that* Bethlehem.  
Fine by me.

Let's start with Mary,  
whose story we heard this morning.  
Imagine, if you can.  
Mary was a teenaged, inexperienced, unknown,  
and powerless young woman—  
the legal property of her father,  
soon to become the legal property  
of a carpenter named Joseph.  
And God chose to come to her *first*,  
to use *her* as an agent for the salvation of the world.  
It's utterly absurd, and Mary knew it.

After she let the shocking message of the angel soak in,  
and chose to believe it, and yield to it,  
she went and told her wise elder cousin Elizabeth about it.

And when Elizabeth confirmed that this was God at work in her,  
Mary broke out in song,  
singing a revolutionary song of joy—  
singing of the little people triumphing over the big,  
the weak over the strong,  
the poor over the rich,  
the nobodies over the somebodies.  
It was *unheard* of in *her* life,  
and in the life of her oppressed people.  
But somehow, she believed in a God who loved the little people.  
So she sang her heart out:  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

How are *we* supposed to make sense of this?—  
this prediction that the entire social order as we know it,  
will be turned on its head?  
Who here believes *that's* going to happen, anytime *soon*?  
But it's a song we can sing with sincerity,  
if we've made a choice to occupy Bethlehem.

There's something really strange about that fact that this song,  
the "Magnificat,"  
has been immortalized in hundreds of musical compositions,  
has been sung in the world's grandest cathedrals,  
and performing halls,  
by the world's highest-paid singers and choirs,  
and applauded by kings and queens and aristocrats?  
And the whole song is about God bringing down  
the rich and powerful!

And it's not just the *Magnificat* that defies common sense.  
The whole story is that way.  
It's a good news story for the nobodies of this world.

To occupy Bethlehem, is to sit with this whole outlandish idea,  
that God would launch the greatest salvation project in history,  
in a place like Bethlehem,  
with people like Mary and Joseph.  
Just the geography in this story is enough to turn heads.  
Bethlehem, the prophet Micah said,  
was one of the little, insignificant clans of Judah.  
And Joseph and Mary's home town, Nazareth—  
had a common saying attached to it:  
"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Think of all the "little people" God chose to use,  
to help unfold the story of salvation.  
Mary, the unwed teenager, engaged to a carpenter,  
became the very host for God.  
Shepherds, scorned for being dirty and smelly and uneducated,  
became the appointed messengers of God.  
And think for a moment about the parents of John the Baptist.  
Priest Zechariah, believe it or not, was also an unknown.  
He was only one man in a large division of priests,  
and *his* division was only one of 24,  
who, for two weeks each year,  
would leave their day job  
and put in their required time at the temple.  
The only reason he was in the holy place that day  
when the angel appeared to him,  
was because it was during the two weeks  
his division was on duty,  
and he drew the short straw that day  
and had to light the incense.  
On the streets in Jerusalem,  
nobody knew who Zechariah was.  
And Elizabeth was nothing more than *Mrs. Zechariah*.  
All the heroes in this story—*all* of them—  
were people of little or no standing,  
in a tiny country being occupied by a foreign power.  
And *now*, let's take a look at what actually happened  
in Bethlehem that day,

which we celebrate now with dazzling light displays,  
feverish consumer spending,  
and eating and drinking ourselves crazy.

The story is too shrouded in legend  
to grasp how raw, how pathetic, how revolutionary it really is.

The image we all have

is Joseph leading the serene and very pregnant Mary  
who's sitting gracefully atop his gentle donkey.  
Knocking at the door of a quaint inn,  
a kindly innkeeper, out of compassion,  
takes them out back and offers them fresh straw  
and a manger that *oddly*, resembles a little wooden crib,  
where Mary quietly gives birth to a baby boy . . .  
while angels hover, the stars twinkle,  
the sheep and cattle peer at the child in their midst,  
and, *amazingly*, "no crying he makes."

Not *one* of details I just mentioned is actually in the Bible story.

Not *one*.

It's okay to enjoy the story, to sing the songs,  
to put up the Nativity scenes.  
I do, too.

Just remember it's legend.

Meaningful, yes. Life-affirming, yes.  
Biblical, no.

Here's a more likely scenario.

Livestock shelters were crude places, sometimes in caves.  
Mangers were feeding troughs, often carved out of the floor.  
The story makes no mention of *any* innkeeper.  
It was just a fact that every guest room in Bethlehem was full.  
They were an unmarried couple from a backwoods town,  
the girl was about to have a baby,  
I strongly suspect Joseph was trying to keep them invisible.  
I can't imagine them knocking on the door of an inn.  
More than *likely*, they were sneaking around after dark,  
trying to find any safe place out of the way.  
A stinking livestock cave would do the job.

It's amazing Joseph even had the courage to bring Mary *along*.  
*He* was the one who had to pay the tax in Bethlehem, not *Mary*.  
But leaving her alone in Nazareth,  
probably cut off from her friends,  
and about to give birth.  
*That* wasn't safe, *either*.

If you want to imagine what this might have looked like,  
don't go to the pictures already in your head.  
Imagine a poor Mexican couple without documents,  
sneaking around a border town in Arizona.  
*That's* closer to reality than any Christmas card you've seen.

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The story of Christmas, as it unfolds in Bethlehem,  
is a story of the grace of God coming to people  
in their state of utter emptiness, and poverty, and danger.  
*This* is the Bethlehem we need to come back to again.  
And stay here for a while.  
And reflect on what it means for us today.

What does it *mean* to worship a God, who,  
when something really important needs to be done,  
seems to choose people that are out of sight,  
places that are off the map,  
and situations that . . . *well* . . . stink.

What I *don't* think it means, is that God hates the rich and powerful.  
Stories like this might tempt us to vilify the rich,  
and glorify the poor and oppressed.  
That is *not* what's happening here.  
God appreciates wealth.  
Which is why God has such compassion on those *without it*.  
God appreciates power, when used to carry out the will of God.  
Which is why God feels so tender toward those  
who have power taken *from* them.  
God is on the side of joy and beauty and abundance and freedom.  
Which is why God loves the poor, oppressed, and downtrodden,  
and seeks to redeem and rescue them.

I believe what we have in the Magnificat,  
and in the story that follows,  
is not the wrath of God against all those who sit on thrones  
and have wealth and power at their disposal.  
As a matter of fact, in today's Psalm God affirms the enthroned.  
"I have sworn to my servant David," God says,  
"I will establish your descendants forever,  
and build your throne for all generations."

God has no vendetta against the rich and powerful.  
But when the rich and powerful don't live out God's purposes,  
God simply turns to those who *will*.  
If we, who *are* the rich and powerful today,  
fail to serve the poor, or feed the hungry,  
or free the oppressed,  
if we fail to join God's mission of establishing  
justice and peace and goodwill among God's people,  
then God will simply give the job to someone who can *do* it.  
It's *not* that God angrily kicks all powerful people off their thrones.  
It's that when the powerful *fail*, as they often do,  
God lets the powerful get upstaged by the weak.  
The big people get embarrassed when they are exposed  
as actually having less power than the little people.  
They don't get *thrown* out of the palace.  
They get *shamed* out.  
We see that sort of thing happening  
in various ways around the world today.

And Luke isn't the *first* place this kind of thing shows up in the Bible.  
Time and again, God's power came in the guise of weakness,  
and unmasked and shamed the powers of this world.  
Gideon and a handful of men,  
brought down a whole army using silly lanterns and horns.  
Kings and queens were dethroned  
by the words of prophets hiding in caves.

And we know the story of what happened with *Mary's* little boy-child.  
He grew up to be a man  
who turned things upside-down for a living.

He turned to the outcasts of the Jewish world  
to demonstrate God's power and grace—  
Samaritans . . . tax collectors . . . prostitutes . . .  
lepers . . . Roman soldiers.  
He taught that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.  
It starts out so small you can barely see it.  
And it grows from the bottom up.  
He taught that the kingdom of God is like a little yeast in the dough,  
a little salt in the soup, a little light on a hill.

And before Jesus went back to heaven,  
he passed on to others his mission of proclaiming  
and living out the kingdom of God in the world.  
Since Herod and Pilate and the High Priests of Israel,  
obviously weren't equipped to do it,  
he gave the job to a group of 12 ordinary Galileans.

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To "occupy Bethlehem" is come to realize  
that God's kingdom is not going to rise or fall,  
based on who sits in the Oval Office,  
who is speaker of the House,  
or even who runs Wall Street.  
Yes, presidents and senators and bankers can have a huge impact,  
and we ought to care about how politics and human greed  
affect the real lives of real people in all parts of the world,  
and we dare not be silent in the face of corruption and oppression.

But the God of the scriptures, we learn from Bethlehem,  
does not depend on the enthroned to accomplish his purposes.  
God depends on whoever listens carefully to God's invitation,  
and then with a sincere heart,  
says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord;  
let it be with me according to your word."  
*That's* how Mary got the job to help God save the world.  
She said, "Yes." "Here am I."

That's why I say, if we're going to occupy a public space in this world.  
Let's occupy Bethlehem.

Let's live *there* a while.

Let's pitch our tents in *that* place

which honors the little ones that God chooses,  
which rewards those who say "yes" to God.

Jesus Christ did *not* come to earth that night in Bethlehem,  
so that one day he could kick Caesar off his imperial throne,  
and sit there in his place.

*No*, Jesus came to unmask the power of the empire *itself*,  
and demonstrate that God's kingdom is a matter of pure grace.

When we hand over, lay down, set aside  
all the things of this world that encumber us, that weigh us down,  
and, like Mary, willingly approach God with our nothingness,  
saying, "here am I, your servant."  
then God's grace is given the space it needs to work its miracle.  
Our nothingness, is the gift God wants.  
It's what God *needs* from us.

And it's the gift God got from Mary,  
when the angel came to her on God's behalf,  
announcing, and requesting,  
and Mary said yes.

May we also, *always*, say yes.

And let's sing about that yes from Mary,  
turning to STS (purple book), #11.

*No wind at the window, no knock on the door  
No light from the lamp stand, no foot on the floor  
No dream born of tiredness, no ghost raised by fear  
Just an angel and a woman and a voice in her ear*

*"Oh, Mary, Oh, Mary don't hide from my face  
Be glad that you're favored and filled with God's grace  
The time for redeeming the world has begun  
And you are requested to mother God's son*

*This child must be born that the Kingdom might come  
Salvation for many, destruction for some*

*Both end and beginning, both message and sign  
Both victor and victim, both yours and divine."*

*No payment was promised, no promises made  
No wedding was dated, no blue print displayed  
Yet Mary, consenting to what none could guess  
Replied with conviction, "tell God I say yes."*

—Phil Kniss, December 18, 2011