

Advent Sermon Series: Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam

Sermon: "Power or Love?"

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Psalm 33; John 3:16-17; 1 John 4:7-12

Salem United Methodist Church; December 13, 2015

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On this third Sunday of Advent, we are knee deep in Christmas preparations as we continue to wait expectantly for Christ to come again. During this season of Advent we are exploring how in the midst of the bedlam Jesus comes, not wielding absolute power, but offering us love.

The sermon title is: "Power or Love?" The title evokes a choice. Which do we choose? Perhaps we need to define power? How would you define power? We could define it as someone who is in a position of authority, someone who has influence, someone who has financial wealth. Power can be used for good or it can be used to harm. Someone who has power consciously or unconsciously makes decisions every day as to how they will use their power. Will they use their influence, authority, and resources to help the masses, to do good in the world, or will they use everything at their disposal to harm people? History has recorded people in seats of power who have done both. There have been powerful people who have used their resources to keep people from starving and/or being killed, who have averted wars, or who have worked for peace. And there have been people in positions of power who have massacred people who were different from them for whatever reason, as well as harmed or killed their own people who disagreed with them. From our knowledge of human history, can you think of examples of how people used their positions of power for good? Can you think examples of how people used their positions of power to harm, maim, and kill?

There is a piece of the Christmas story that doesn't get told very often, probably because it is not endearing. This part of the nativity story, found in chapter 2 of the Gospel of Matthew, tells of the Wise Men going to the king of Judea, Herod, to ask what he might know about a newborn king. What the Wise Men don't know about Herod is that he is a tyrant. He has killed members of his own family who he thought were preparing to take his throne. Now Herod has a new threat—a child king. He is afraid that this child will overthrow him. To secure his royal position, Herod orders all the children in and around Bethlehem under the age of two to be killed. Can you imagine the fear, the terror, and the grief in Bethlehem? He is the poster king for abuse of power for his own personal gain. Just in case, you don't know how Jesus escaped this "Slaughter of the Innocents," God interceded and protected Jesus by sending an angel to Joseph informing him to escape with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. So Mary and Joseph became refugees searching for a safe place to live in a foreign land.

Have you ever thought about this? When Herod ordered the slaughter of innocent children to try to annihilate this newborn king, why didn't God just kill Herod and his soldiers? Why did God allow them to kill all those innocent children? Wouldn't this have been retributive justice like is mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures, an eye for an eye kind of thing? Yes, in chapter 21 in the Book of Exodus, God instructs Moses how to judge the people when they do wrong with retribution. Punishment was based on the crime one committed, such as an "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." This may seem harsh, but God was actually curbing how people retaliated. It was not uncommon when a crime was committed to a family member that the family would go and wipe out an entire tribe. Later, Jesus takes this idea of retributive justice to a whole new level in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:38-42). Basically he states, if someone harms you, do good back to them. These words are very difficult for us to hear, much less live. We want to hurt those who hurt us, but Jesus teaches us another way: the way of love. Before we get into exploring this love that comes to us at Christmas, let's think for a moment: What would this world be like if God was a god of retribution? What if God wielded all the power that God has to take control of us? To punish us? To make us do what God wants us to do? What if God chose one group of people to live and wiped out another group because God didn't like something about them or because they posed a threat to God? What kind of relationship would we have with this kind of God? Would we live in fear? Would we try to hide from God? Would we try to retaliate against God?

I am so grateful that God is not this type of God. I am so grateful that God is a God of love, a God of mercy, a God of forgiveness, and a God of new beginnings. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17). And yet, as we look back over human history and compare it to what is happening in the world today, it seems like we haven’t learned much about God’s love for humanity and our response to that love. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a twentieth century French Jesuit priest, wrote “Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides, and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.” This quote to me sounds hopeless because can humanity ever control the wind, waves, tides, and gravity? And if we can’t, then we will never harness the energies of love? And yet, God breaks through. God chose to come to us as a baby. God could have just appeared with all the drama any cinematographer could imagine, bright light, thunderous sounds, and quaking earth. God could have come to earth shouting orders to us, wielding power to put us in our places or worse, but God didn’t. God came as an infant in the middle of the night to novice parents who had no home. The only gift they had to offer God was the gift of love to this infant. All that was needed was love. The love they had for Jesus helped him grow and claim his place as our Messiah. Love came down that Christmas only to discover that he was surrounded by love. God came as love, not as a tyrant.

I found a video clip this week that I think is a great example of how God’s love is born, how a manger can break through our bedlam, whatever it may be, whether it be leaders who abuse power with terror, or our loneliness, despair, and grief. God comes to us in the form of a baby who needs love and who is love. This clip comes from a little known Christmas film which stars Jimmy Stewart as an older man. We all know his famous role in “It’s A Wonderful Life,” but we may not be familiar with his role in “Mr. Krueger’s Christmas.” This low budget 1980’s movie is only about twenty-five minutes long. The main character is Willie Krueger, an older man who lives alone in a basement apartment of the building where he serves as the custodian. While Mr. Krueger listens to Christmas carols, he either remembers Christmases past or he fantasizes about Christmases that never were. It’s hard to tell. When filming the scene that we will see today, Jimmy Stewart is to have told the cameraman to make sure he recorded this scene, because “I only have one of these in me.” The scene begins with Mr. Krueger listening to a recording of the Mormon Tabernacle singing, “What Child Is This?” As Mr. Krueger looks upon the manger scene sitting on a table in his one room apartment, he is transported to the manger in Bethlehem. Humbly he approaches the Christ Child. He thanks the baby for all that he has done for him in his lifetime, especially the time his wife died. Mr. Krueger states that he knew Jesus cared for him, even when he didn’t like himself. He knew that Jesus was there with him in the dark times of his life. And then Mr. Krueger thanks Jesus, as the babe in the manger, for transforming his heart when he disliked a lady in his apartment house. With the love of Jesus, he was able to befriend and help this same lady. The scene ends with Mr. Krueger kneeling at the manger and proclaiming his love for Jesus.

A manger scene may appear to be some painted pieces of clay, plastic, or wood, but what it represents can be one way in which Bethlehem breaks through our bedlam. The prophet Zechariah got it right when he proclaimed: “The Lord is in your midst... he will create calm with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.” Love came down at Christmas and the power of this love is more powerful than retaliation, massacres, prejudice, and hate. To quote the Apostle John, “Dear friends, if God loves us this way, we also ought to love each other... If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us.”

Reflection Questions: How will you allow the love of a baby in the manger to break through your Christmas bedlam?

Resources: *Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam* by James Moore; “Jimmy Stewart’s Other Christmas Movie,” <http://mymerrychristmas.com/jimmy-stewarts-other-christmas-movie/>

