

## **The other side of the manger**

Luke 3:7-18

December 13, 2009

*Silent night, holy night,  
all is calm, all is bright round yon virgin mother and child.  
Holy infant so tender and mild,  
sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.*

Why do we love this carol so much? It can't be because of the music! There is much better Christmas music. There are other carols surely more beautiful, like this one:

*What child is this who laid to rest  
on Mary's lap is sleeping,  
whom angels greet with anthems sweet,  
while shepherds watch are keeping?*

And it's not because its theology is particularly profound. Its lyrics cannot compare with these:

*Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings,  
risen with healing in his wings.  
Mild he lays his glory by,  
born that man no more may die,  
born to raise the sons of earth,  
born to give them second birth ...*

So why do we love this carol? We love it, I think, because of the feelings it engenders in us, because of mood it creates in us:

- a feeling of quiet awe: *silent night, holy night ...*
- feelings of tenderness and affection and hopefulness: *holy infant so tender and mild ...*

The carol creates a space where we experience quiet and calm and peace, all the possibilities and promise that accompany the birth of a new baby, all the possibilities and promise that accompany the birth of this new baby, and it's a wonderful place to be!

This carol, *Silent Night*, is a microcosm of what we find most attractive and most compelling about the holiday as a whole: that sense of peacefulness, of respite from the frustrations and aggravations of everyday living; that sense of quiet awe; that sense of being visited by something, by someone, who brings us, as nothing else can, feelings of comfort and joy and rest. When we sing the carol in the midnight darkness, our sanctuary illuminated only by the soft light of a hundred candles, that's what we feel, that's what we want to feel.

That's what draws us to the manger: peace, calm, comfort, tenderness, innocence, newness. But there is another side to the manger.

John the prophet, the forerunner, the baptist, proclaimed his message in the wilderness:

*Turn away from your sins and be baptized, and God will forgive your sins ...*

And they listened! They listened and they came!

*Crowds of people came out to John to be baptized ...*

What an opportunity! It was the fulfillment of an evangelist's dream, a response beyond anything a voice crying in the wilderness could ever hope for. There they were, so many of them, all of them responsive, ready, expectant, eager to hear the word of the Lord that this man John would speak to them.

John looked out at the crowd and said:

*You snakes! Who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send?*

Oh, John! You didn't just say that! Clearly John had no vested interest in counting baptisms or converts, no desire to maintain his own popularity, no need to be successful in the usual sense of the word. His one vested interest was the message itself, getting that message out without confusion, without dilution:

*Repent! Turn away! Turn around! Do those things that show you have turned from your sins.*

Now you have to give them credit, all those people who came out into the wilderness to see John. They stuck around! They didn't go away. They didn't take offense. They wanted to know what they should do. And John told them. John told them to forsake the temptations of power for the sake of love.

We sometimes say, as the scripture says in one place, that the love of money is the root of all evil, but that is so only in so far as money is a source and tool of power. It is the love of power that is the root of all evil: our desire to aggrandize power, to wield power, to hold power over, to be in charge, to be in control, our penchant for using power to our own advantage, our penchant for using power to gain more power.

John addressed those who held power by one means or another. He addressed tax collectors who held the power to take money at will from whomever they will with the backing of the empire:

*Don't collect more than is legal ...*

He addressed soldiers who held the power of the sword, permitting them to line their pockets or punish their rivals by force or intimidation or vested authority:

*Don't take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely, be content with your pay ...*

John even addressed Herod, the king, the governor of Galilee, reprimanding him for abusing his power, using the power of his position to take his brother's wife, and it was speaking the truth to that power that ultimately cost John his life.

And John addressed the rest of them, all of them who held power simply by having, the power of wealth:

*Whoever has two shirts must give one to the man who has none ...  
Whoever has food must share it ...*

This, I think, is the most radical directive of all. It goes way beyond the commandment, "Do not steal." Showing the genuineness of their repentance meant much more than not abusing power, much more than not wrongly taking from someone else. It meant giving, freely sharing, using power explicitly for the benefit of another.

John offered no conditions, no limitations, no exceptions, no exigent circumstances to govern this rule of sharing. If you have two shirts, if you have food, it means you. It's that simple, that uncomplicated, that easy.

That easy? But this is the way they will -- this is the way we will show that we have turned from the love of power to the power of love.

The people got very excited as they listened to John, as they watched him challenge the powers that be, as they heard him challenge the powers in them, all the powers outside and inside that held the world captive and filled it with cruelty and violence and sadness. They thought he might be the Messiah!

Because the Messiah will come to set things right, to purge the world of injustice, to turn power on its head, and, yes, the Messiah would have to begin with them, making them ready, setting them right, purging them of any evil in them, saving them by calling them to their better selves.

But, no, John was not the Messiah.

*I baptize you with water, he declared, but someone is coming who will baptize you with fire!*

A cleansing, refining, consuming fire -- watch out lest you be burned! The Messiah will baptize with the fire of judgement, a fire that will burn away all that is not fit for the world as it should be, all that is not fit for the world as it will be, a fire that will leave in its wake ... a world made new.

This is the other side of the manger. Holy infant so tender and mild? Hardly! Or maybe. May it be that the Holy One is both terrible and wonderful at the same time? Both awe-ful and tender? Fierce and merciful?

May it be that justice is the other side of love and love the other side of justice? May it be that love itself is not merely tender and mild, but strong and pushy and relentless, never finished, never backing down, until it has won the well-being of the beloved? This is a love that doesn't just coddle and comfort you. This is a love that changes your life. This is a love that transforms the world!

Maybe Herod got it right. Maybe Herod understood better than most what the birth of the Messiah would mean. This baby was a threat, to him and to all who fed themselves on the privileges of power. This Messiah will not merely reprimand him. This Messiah will wholly disenfranchise him! This Messiah will declaw and humble and humiliate the princes and the powers of this earth.

Herod understood that, and so he issued an order to kill the babies of Bethlehem, to kill them all just so he might rid himself of that One. There is a carol, a Christmas carol, about that awful event. Julie found it in a hymnal I brought back with me from Scotland. Its mood is far, far from the mood of *Silent Night*. It will never be an especially beloved carol, but it does tell the truth. It tells the powerful truth from the other side of the manger.

*The tyrant issues his decree,  
and only those forewarned can flee;  
while children, true to prophecy,  
are culled because of jealousy.*

*Bewildered parents claw the air  
with shrieks of horror and despair,  
and all of Bethlehem laments  
the slaughter of the innocents.*

*Only a tyrant cold impose  
this murder of imagined foes;  
yet still the power of love defies  
the love of power and all its lies.*

*A Saviour, saved by sacrifice  
of those who died there in his place,  
shall live to die another day,  
and, dying, show another way. (Words: Iain D. Cunningham)*

Through this child, this Messiah, this One, the power of love defies the love of power and all its lies.

Through this One, the power of love will show us another way.

Through this One, the power of love will save the world.

Through this One, the power of love will save you.