



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Child vs. The Powers and Principalities

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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The star-gazers arrived. It's a great story; one that tells a lot more than the small amount of words might indicate. The magi, the wise men, not kings as tradition has come to think of them, but those who read signs in the skies, do not merely take a long trip and bring gifts. Their presence in the story tells us right off the bat that the Christ child did not come only for the Jews. Christ is the gift for the whole world, simple people, grungy shepherds, pagan astrologers and who knows who else. If Mary and Joseph had been surprised by the visit of the shepherd, all agog at the angelic announcement, we can only guess at how such a delegation would seem. Just imagine if there were a knock on your door shortly after the arrival of a new baby, and there stood strangers who had travelled half way around the world just to see your son and drop off some gifts. Of course, around here, we don't ask, "wow, did it really happen that way?" "Did they really bring that stuff?" We look at what the details of the story tell us. The wise men brought symbolic gifts of gold, the appropriate gift for a king, frankincense, used by priests in the Temple, and myrrh. The myrrh is interesting because it is oil for anointing - and Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God, but it is also used for burial preparation. Myrrh returns in the Gospel of John, when Nicodemus brought it and aloe to anoint Jesus' body for burial. It could be considered an odd, but prescient baby gift. These symbolic gifts tell us about who this child is and will be and why the angels sang "Glory!"

But not everyone was thrilled. The prologue to the Gospel of John which we read last week, says that his own people did not accept him. That includes Herod who saw the child as a political rival, a danger to his authority. So this story with its gifts brought from faraway places and a star, has the shadow of myrrh and the threat of murder. Herod tried to follow through on his threat, but in another great story, Joseph was warned in a dream to get his family to safety. So under cover of darkness, they fled to Egypt until Herod was no longer around to be a threat to Jesus.

It is unfortunate that this loveliest of stories, the divine child born in a barn with angels and stars announcing it, has to be invaded by the threat of violence. But there it is. The choir just sang a beautiful Christmas piece; Where you there, were you on that Christmas night? How many of you heard the echo of another song, 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?' That song came out of slavery, a people's despair. They were exactly the ones who needed Jesus' message of freedom. Their trust in his promise sustained them until they were freed and has sustained them ever since through a century and a half of struggle for equality and respect. As slaves, there were few Bible verses that were allowed to the people stolen from Africa.

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Usually the ones about slaves obeying their masters. But God's story is hard to keep under wraps and they learned the story of Moses and the Exodus and the story of the man from Gallilee who reached out to the outcasts and slaves to set them. Their faith in Jesus gave them hope for their own liberation. This Jesus, this child born in a barn was a threat to the powers of the world: Herod, Caesar, slave economies, and apparently, if you read the news this week, big business. More on that in a minute

This child was a danger to the way that the world operates. And the fact that his birth is announced by heavenly beings and the heavens themselves, tells us that this is a cosmic drama. The incarnation was not some event intended to topple a particular dictator; it is a divine chess move against what the Letter to the Ephesians calls "the powers and principalities of this present darkness." This child was not destined to become a warrior king and ride against human foes. He was the one to undo evil in the world. Evil that enslaves people, that keeps people poor, hungry, cold, and desperate, evil that see people as something to exploit, human capital for the machines of war and enrichment of the few. This child would grow up to confront systems. And that made him a danger to more than Herod.

Walter Wink was a giant in 20th century religious thought. He was a theology professor, a writer, an innovative Biblical thinker. He wrote extensively on the "powers and principalities." Wink defined these powers and principalities not as demonic beings but as demonic social realities, systems that oppress and exploit people. He called them "impersonal spiritual realities at the center of institutional life." These powers can be seen throughout human history in the "isms" that infect our common life, racism, sexism, materialism, consumerism, militarism, nationalism, even sometimes patriotism. These human failings are found throughout the world, in every culture. And all too often, the powers and principalities achieve status and authority and protect themselves with violence.

Professor Wink said, "This overarching network of Powers is what we are calling the Domination System. It is characterized by unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all... from the ancient Near Eastern states to the Pax Romana to feudal Europe to communist state capitalism to modern market capitalism..." (*The Powers that Be*, p. 39)

Is it any wonder that someone who would grow up to oppose such a system would be a threat to those who benefit from the way that the world works? When Jesus lifted up the lowly and gave hope to the oppressed he was a threat that needed to be neutralized. And the powers and principalities of the day, the Roman Empire, used its tools of violence to save itself. It was a miscalculation because Easter was God's response.

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The sad thing is that the powers and principalities of this world have done a pretty good job of neutralizing the message of freedom, beginning with Constantine who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The church which was meant to transform the world was co-opted by it. Look at the people who have felt the sting of the Domination System in the name of religion. And just this week, Pope Francis, poked at the hornet's nest. He has started talking about economic oppression and the inequality that mires so many in or near poverty so that a small number of fortunates may have much more than they need. The powers and principalities answered with a warning shot across the Pope's bow. The billionaire owner of a huge retail chain warned the Pope that if he didn't change his tone, well those rich people might not give their money to the church anymore. Francis has been excoriated on Talk Radio as being a communist, Marxist, and of all things, an Argentinean who can't possibly understand American capitalism. And so he should just be quiet. Well, I think that this Pope is tired of the powers and principalities going unchallenged. He is after all, one who follows the Christ, who was a threat to power from day one. The Child was born to change the world, to save it from itself. As we come to the end of this Christmas season, it is good to remember that Christianity is not for the faint hearted. It's not about who gets into heaven. It is about how we become what we are meant to be. We are the inheritors of the cosmic mission begun in a barn, by a baby, armed only with love.

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