



December 4, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

"Snapshots from Matthew's Christmas Album"

Reading: Matthew 1:18-2:12

Even though it's now almost two years since Vancouver welcomed the world to its doorstep for the 2010 Olympic games, we still remember well the Olympic mascots. You remember them don't you? (picture here) Itchy the bedbug, Creepy the cockroach and Chewy the Rat? Even if you don't recognize these mascots, the mascots of the 2010 Poverty Olympics, what you will recognize is the fun being poked at the real Olympics in an effort to draw attention to more serious issues. Anyone who witnessed the Poverty Olympics, in which contestants participated in events such as the poverty line high jump and the welfare hurdles would immediately know they were meant to draw attention to poverty and homelessness in Vancouver, in the face of what some called a 2 billion dollar party. They were a parody of the real event.

One of the most thought provoking interpretations I've come across of Matthew's version of Jesus' birth, is that Matthew's story was meant to be a parody. Most scholars agree that virgin births were extremely common in antiquity; that anybody who was anybody came into the world via some miraculous avenue. The Roman Emperors, Plato, Apollo, Alexander the Great, all came from divine parentage and stories of comets and special stars appearing at a birth were also common in the ancient world. The fore bearers of Caesar Augustus were even said to have followed a guiding star that led them westward into Italy, into the heart of the Roman Empire. What scholar Amy Levine says is that Matthew is poking fun at all of this. Why else, she says, would Joseph plan to leave Mary when he discovers she is pregnant with a divinely begotten son? After all, he should have been delighted. In antiquity all that meant was he was destined for great things. And, who ever heard, she says, of a star that stops directly over someone's house? The star would have to have been only a few meters off the ground?

In the same way we know that Itchy, Creepy and Chewy are mocking Quatchi, Sumi and Miga Matthew's community, says Levine, would certainly have known that the Virgin Birth and the guiding star were also meant to mock. Matthew's community, she says would have known that he was saying to them "We don't need those Greek Gods and their miraculous portents. What's important about Jesus isn't his heavenly function, what's important about Jesus is that this baby will grow up to give us the Sermon on the Mount." This baby will grow up to tell us Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Dominic Crossan takes a slightly different approach to the story of Jesus birth as found in Matthew and Luke's gospels, but he would agree with Amy Levine and others that we should not take the events literally. To become obsessed with the facts, he says, is to allow the story to lose its edge. Crossan suggests the story of Jesus' birth should be understood as a parable.

In the same way to ask questions about the factual life of the good Samaritan, whether or not he had a wife and kids at home, would be to miss the point of the parable to "go and do likewise" love the enemy in the ditch; to ask questions about the facts of Jesus' birth is to avoid the challenge of this parable. Just what is the challenge of the parable of Jesus birth? Just what is the meaning of the story if it is a parody, if it's not meant to be taken as fact?

To help us answer those questions it's important to look at Matthew's story of Jesus' birth through 1st century eyes. These were the days of the Roman Empire in which Caesar Augustus reigned supreme. He carried the titles Lord, Son of God, Bringer of Peace and Saviour of the World. These were the days

when the imperial power of Rome reached far and wide wielding its strength through military, political, economic and ideological power. Overall, the agenda of the Roman Empire was an agenda of achieving peace through submission and violence. The people of Israel were among those who being forced to submit.

It's in this context that the writer of Matthew's gospel tells the story of Jesus who proclaims a different kind of power and a different agenda, power that comes from within and dares to stand up to imperial power and peace and freedom that comes not through violence and domination but rather through justice and inclusion and non-violence. Matthew, a Jew writing to a Jewish audience and knowing the Hebrew people have been looking for the longed-for Messiah predicted in the scriptures, paints a picture of Jesus' birth that evokes the memory of another time in history when the Hebrew people were in bondage, namely in Egypt. He echoes the stories of others who have saved the Hebrew people and set them free from oppression, abuse and famine, namely Joseph and Moses.

So Matthew's version of the birth story is told through the eyes of his father Joseph who, like his namesake, the one who wore the coat that made his brother's jealous, was also a dreamer. Joseph is visited by an angel in a dream announcing that the Christ child will be born. (There's no angel that visit's Mary in Matthew's version of the story by the way) It's Joseph who is told in a dream shortly after the child is born that he should flee into Egypt with his wife and child to escape the wrath of Herod and it's Joseph who again is told in a dream of Herod's death encouraging him to return the child to the land of his birth.

In Mathew's telling of the story Jesus becomes a new Moses saved at birth, thrown in the river by his cunning and clever mother, from Pharaoh who orders all the baby boys under the age of three killed because the Hebrew people are becoming too strong. Instead of Pharaoh, it's Herod who orders all the baby boys killed after the Magi come searching for him and Herod becomes afraid of the power and persuasion of this tiny little boy. (We see in this elements again of the parody, why would a grown man, a ruler of the people be so afraid of a little child)

And in Matthew's version of the story Israel is the new Egypt, from Israel that the baby Jesus has to flee. Israel is a land of a people enslaved by forces that seem to be beyond their control, home of oppression and disparity between the haves and the have nots and heavy handed rule; a place where hope of a better future seems distant and unreachable; where peace is maintained through complicity and compliance, the home of Empire.

Some days for us it's not so hard to imagine the longing of a nation for a Messiah, for God to somehow intervene. It's the longing at the heart of the Occupy movement and the Poverty Olympics; it's the longing of the people of Attawapiskat and all who lament our failures in relation to our first nations brothers and sisters; it's the longing of the poorest Nicaraguans who line up by the hundreds in the night for the only eye exam they will have in their lifetime; it's the longing of present day Egypt and Syria and Burma and those who work for peace in Israel and Palestine.

We know the longing in this story because we still live it.

And so the challenge of this parable of Jesus' birth is the same challenge the Magi faced, the challenge to find another way home. A way of being in the world that avoids the traps of Herod, Herod who is not so much an external ruler, but a part of each and every one of us. It's the challenge of avoiding the trap of thinking the only way to find peace is through violence; the trap of getting caught up in systems that dominate and oppress; the trap of believing that power only resides with those who have money and

important positions and loud voices. It's the challenge of deciding whom is deserving of our homage. To whom or to what are we going to kneel down and offer our lives? To all that calls us to stand on the side of the poor, the disenfranchised and the marginalized; or to the empires of Bay Street and Hollywood and Park Royal.

It's the challenge of whether or not we are going to keep waiting for divine intervention, for a Messiah to save us, or whether we are going to listen to the message the child grows up to deliver which is that the world for which we are waiting is not so far away, but here within our reach and here within our hearts, if only we will dare to believe it is so and follow Jesus lead. That is the edge of the Christmas story.

Several weeks ago when the Living the Questions group was studying the incarnation, the stories of Jesus birth, Lima Branch told me about an experience she had one Christmas Eve in the church she had attended for many years. They were having a pick-up pageant, an informal telling of the Christmas story in which people from the congregation were invited to come forward and take a place in the Nativity scene. When it came to the part where the Kings were to come forward, Lima noticed that no one was getting up. So she stood up and went forward to take the place of one of the Magi. "You should have seen the look on the faces of the men and even the women in that congregation" she said. "Clearly they thought I had done something wrong."

But Lima had not done anything wrong, in fact she had done everything right. She had taken her place in the story. That's what Christmas invites us all to do, to take our place in the story; to bear its message with our lives.