

December 22 - Advent 4: Let us Sing - HOPE

Isaiah 9: 6

Matthew 2: 1-12

The last verse of the carol Silent Night invites us to lift our voices in alleluia's to the one who is our "King." It sounds so sweet and nice. It doesn't feel counter cultural. We would never think of it as a cry of rebellion, but it was, as we will see. To call Jesus a king was a radical thing for the people of Jesus' time to do because it implied that Caesar was not their king. Singing "alleluia's to *our* King" continues to be a call for us to ask, "Where do we put absolute allegiance?" By our words and actions, "Who or what are we saying is King?"

To unpack this just a little more, the idea of how calling Jesus "King" was a challenging and revolutionary statement, we need to understand what was being said about Caesar Augustus, who was emperor when Jesus was born. Rome said that because of Caesar the world was experiencing "*Pax Romana*" or Roman Peace. Caesar Augustus had issued in an era of "peace" after a long time of civil war and violence in the Roman Empire. He was, in fact, called "The Prince of Peace!" And yes you are right in thinking that the use of this term by the Gospel writers when heralding Jesus' birth is pretty much an "in-your-face-Caesar," you would be right. Also Caesar was considered to have a divine nature. After his death the Roman senate proclaimed him to be a god. Because of this divine nature Caesar was also called "lord of all." His successor, Tiberius, built temples to the now divine Augustus all over the empire. It was a way to solidify the power of the Caesars. With this understanding of how people talked about Caesar Augustus and the emperors who followed, you begin to understand how talking about Jesus as King, and Lord of Lords, and Prince of Peace was revolutionary. It was a call, then as now, to say that his words, his message is more important than any laws or pronouncements of the Roman government! Even to this day, we struggle with where allegiance to country ends and allegiance to God begins. We are still called to be revolutionaries and sometimes say no to the laws and pronouncements of our elected leaders.

Another thing to understand is that this time of progress and peace, that also led to Rome building an extensive system of roads along with other building projects, was

made possible because of Rome's subjugation of large numbers of people. It was a time of dictatorship, tyranny and totalitarian rule. "Prosperity" and "peace" were only for the few. *Pax Romana* could perhaps be called an ancient media spin! It is in this context that Mary sings the Magnificat. This is what we call the hymn she sang after learning she was to bear the Messiah. Her song addresses the political context of her day straight on—"the powerful will be brought down from their thrones." Revolutionary themes are seeded throughout the birth narrative.

For those not considered the elite few, the hope of liberation would have been discussed in terms of God sending a savior and king to overthrow Caesar's reign of fear and oppression. People would be looking for "signs" of change. The birth of a child in a "nowhere" town to a couple of so-so reputation (after all, she was pregnant and before being married, which made her really low on the radar of power) would not have been the sign they were looking for.

This birth should have gone pretty much unnoticed and yet becomes a sign of trouble to Caesar and a sign of hope to the oppressed as the story unfolded over the years. The ones who "let the cat out of the bag" were in the business of "signs" and "wonders." They were astrologers, considered a science at the time, who paid attention to these things. Astrology not only notices the stars and planetary bodies, but assigns meaning to them. A "sign" was something to pay attention to because it was a form of guidance in the quest for truth and knowledge about the future. The star that appeared was so significant that they traveled to investigate it. And when they approached Herod, agent of Caesar, the Gospel of Matthew described their question this way, "Where is the newborn King of the Jews?" Uh. Oh. The word.... king. It made Herod afraid. Tyranny only works when you have all the power over a people. Tyrants are afraid of losing power. They stay vigilant to ward off threats to that power. When power becomes a god, you fear losing it. When you reign by fear, you live by fear. Now he hears that one has been born that might challenge him. He does all that he can, from lying to the astrologers to ordering the massacre of children, to try to eradicate this threat.

Jesus comes into this world of oppression and fear to proclaim a new way. Jesus came to give us hope and to say that God's love is more powerful than the forces of the world. We are called to have hope instead of fear believing in this message of love.

Hope serves as a defense against despair. We need hope because if we can't access hope, fear rules. Sometimes we do get caught up in the fear story. It is compelling. Power and wealth seem so strong. Love seems so inadequate. We feel as if we are being foolish to trust in love and forgiveness in the face of brute power. This is what the Caesars of our day want. When a people are kept far from their hope, they are more easily swayed by fear. But staying in the fear story continues to serve tyrannical power.

We are called instead to follow signs of hope, which can ultimately illumine the way to a better way of being together. Hope gives us the assurance that we have the time to listen to one another and see all as beloved. Hope allows us to believe a new reign of peace and justice is possible, a peace not just for a few, but for all. Hope causes us to grow and hope changes us into the sorts of persons we want to have inhabiting this world.

Yet this is so hard to do. People too often interpret life through the lens of fear—yes, even and perhaps especially church people. We're afraid of being inconsequential, of having our efforts make so little difference in the world, and frankly, of dying. The tyranny we face might be different from that faced in Jesus' day but it is still around us. For some it is the tyranny of the almighty dollar that drives every decision, or of perfectionism, or the need to be upwardly mobile. For some it is the tyranny of an unforgiving relationship, the rejection of family. For some it is addiction to things or substances in an attempt to numb the fear. The "empire" that we resist has many faces. There are many things that want our allegiance.

The light of God's guiding star illuminates the fact that the "truths" the Caesars and Herods of the world pronounce as real are false. F.E.A.R. = False Evidence Appearing Real.

Where do you need to reject supposed truths to have hope? Where do you need to let go of a certain mindset to find calm instead of fear? How do we stand against powers, reject fear and approach Christmas with hope? What we are called to do is see, in the overarching narrative of humanity and our faith, that love and life, joy and hope, peace and light, are more powerful truths, more mighty, than the tyranny of fear. Because of this knowledge, we choose to live with those as our guiding star. And that star leads us to each other. We find that in loving and forgiving one another we find the

fear subsiding. When we focus on the powerful truths of God's call to love we can see the false evidence of the world for what it is and not give in to fear.

With verse four, we are called to sing "Alleluia to our king." We should do it with joy and hope because we have hindsight about this story and we know what ends up being true. It will take some time to bring Caesar down, and the Caesars of the world keep cropping up, but it happens. Caesar, as I said, was proclaimed the Prince of Peace and lord of lords. He was the powerful one, not a baby born in Bethlehem. Yet, 300 years later Christianity became the religion of the empire and even the Caesar of that day proclaimed Jesus to be his Lord. God is on the move always and this gives us hope and allows us to let go of fear.

I want to, just like the shepherds long ago, be silent and listen and hear God's cry in the silent night. I will know again God is with me and my King reigns. We are going to gather in a few hours to celebrate the birth of Jesus. My prayer is that in this time you can let go of fear, let go of doubt, and let go of anger. Instead, be filled with love, be filled with trust and most of all be filled with hope. No matter what you are feeling about your life or the world today, remember God is with us and ultimately our God is a God of love and this is the most powerful force the world has ever known.