

Christmas Eve Sermon
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Tonight is Christmas Eve, when we celebrate the birth of a Jewish prophet, that some call God. Born to unwed parents, he grew up to build a movement that would change the religious and political landscape of the world forever. A message of Christmas Eve is that no matter where our lives will lead, we all start as babies. Our experiences shape us, our stories unfold, and we make our mark on the world, but first, we are born. Celebrating this helps us to honor our humanity. Christmas Eve is also an opportunity to celebrate the life of a prophet who inspires so many people to fight for justice, for the outsider, and for the oppressed. It is an opportunity to remember that though Christianity grew and has at times been co-opted by states and the powerful to do evil things, it began as the prophethood of a young man and his followers, a young man who was born, lived and died.

Tonight is also the first night of Chanukkah, a story of oppression, rebellion, and religious freedom. Israel was controlled by the Persian empire in the seventh century BCE and then by Alexander the Great. Over time many Jewish people, especially those in cities, were secularized, through their interactions with Greek and other cultures. Distance grew between the Jewish identity of the farmers and laborers in the country and that of those in the cities. In the time of Antiochus the IV, who was by all accounts a harsh ruler, he sought to completely assimilate the Jews. He wanted uniformity so that the territory could be more easily ruled. In 1Maccabees it is written:

41 Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people, ⁴²and that all should give up their particular customs. ⁴³All the Gentiles accepted the command of the king. Many even from Israel gladly adopted his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the sabbath. ⁴⁴And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, ⁴⁵to forbid burnt-offerings and sacrifices and drink-offerings in the sanctuary, to profane sabbaths and festivals, ⁴⁶to defile the sanctuary and the priests, ⁴⁷to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice swine and other unclean animals, ⁴⁸and to leave their sons uncircumcised...⁵⁰He added,* ‘And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die.’

Around 165 BCE, a rebellion began led by a man named Matthias and the group that became known as the Maccabees against Antiochus IV, and it was eventually successful. They drove out the Greek military and rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem. It is part of Jewish identity and story that in that moment, a core of people in Judea were able to gather together and against all odds, reclaim their most holy place and rededicate it to their faith. In the Chanukkah story in the Talmud, when the dust settled and the temple was re-consecrated, Jewish leaders wanted to follow the laws of the Torah, the whole reason they were fighting in the first place. But when they went to light the menorah, there was only enough oil for one night, and they needed enough for eight. That the oil lasted is a miracle not because they needed to be able to see, but because they wished to follow the law and through the miracle of the oil, they were able to, in freedom.

In the time of the Maccabees, Jewish identity was threatened with violence and the community reclaimed the right to worship and observe their faith through violence. In our time, Rabbi Michael Lerner writes:

Some ... believe in military power as the primary way to create security for Israel, just as some American nationalists believe that we can achieve security without addressing the social injustices that our economic system has generated around the world. They believe that larger social transformations are “unrealistic” and think that our survival depends solely on our strength. Yet this way of thinking is... the validation of that which is and the inability to commit to that which ought to be. We affirm a different vision of strength. Our survival and the survival of the entire planet depend on our ability to create a world of love and caring, a world of peace and justice, a world in which every human being is treated as an embodiment of the spirit of God.¹

The story of Jesus’ birth in Christian Scripture was written by his followers, after his death, and so the story becomes epic, with stars, and magi, and angels. Who is to say how it actually went down in Bethlehem that night, but my guess is that more of the story is true than isn’t. I believe that an unwed mother and her fiancé were turned away at the inn, that they were traveling because of bureaucracy and taxes, and that when their child was born, they saw God.

As we move forward into the new year, we will continue to speak truth to power, to fight those who would rule by violence, by taking away the rights of people to worship as they believe, to marry who they love, to live without fear of violence because of their background or identity. It will be vital to hold on to the teachings of the man who Jesus became, to not face violence with violence, but with unrelenting love, to hold a mirror to injustice and change the hearts and minds of people, to take a stand without sacrificing conscience and principle. We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person, each baby, we are all connected, and we are all flawed. How we choose to move through the next months and years as a world with genocide, war, violence, and climate disaster, not to mention the concerns around rights and justice in our communities, it is going to be a hard road. So tonight, we remember that each of us began as a baby. Each night that a child is born is a holy night, which means that every night, and every day is holy, and rife with the potential to change the world with our choices and our passion. In Rabbi Lerner’s words:

Our survival and the survival of the entire planet depend on our ability to create a world of love and caring, a world of peace and justice, a world in which every human being is treated as an embodiment of the spirit of God.²

May it be so.
Amen.

¹ Michael Lerner, editor of Tikkun CHANUKAH. Tikkun; Nov/Dec2009, Vol. 24 Issue 6, p33-35,

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