

Alpha and Omega + Compassion = Christmas

December 24, 2024

More Than a Birthday Party

A few years back, I saw a video of a church Christmas celebration gone ridiculously sideways. This big church — I mean, really big — decided that they were going to have a birthday cake for Jesus following worship. You may have seen something like that before. Lots of churches do it.

What went sideways was they had the bright idea, and I mean bright idea, of putting 2021 candles on the cake and lighting them. (Now, never mind the fact that scholars are now pretty confident that Jesus was born somewhere between 4-6 C.E., so even the number of candles wasn't correct.) The video showed just a couple of people, furiously trying to light candle after candle after candle, the first ones becoming puddles of wax long before the ones on the periphery even had a chance to be lit. The planners DID at least start with the candles on the interior of the cake, so the reason the fire alarm went off wasn't because of a sleeve catching fire when someone leaned over a lit candle, but rather simply because of the heat generated by thousands of candles. Needless to say, the next year, they bought those little wax numbers like you find at Party City, and only lit four candles — 2-0-2-2.

It's a silly example, but I love how the humor in that video gives us a springboard into exploring the idea that, while in Christmas we do celebrate Jesus' birth, it's also about a whole lot more. A birthday party for Jesus is cute, but it misses the depth of what we're really doing here.

A few weeks ago, Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote a column in which she said she had recently found herself, "actively trying to avoid despair like I owe it money or something." I just love that imagery — avoiding despair's phone calls, choosing to go to coffee shops that you know despair doesn't frequent, slipping down another aisle in the grocery store, rather than bumping carts with despair. In the column, she noted that there were some biblical themes that were helping her avoid despair, but in order for those to make sense, she first wrote what she called her "autobiography of worry."

Interesting idea, isn't it, an autobiography of worry? To be honest, I can't imagine an autobiography of worry being picked up by a publisher, but it's still a worthwhile exercise.

What would yours include? Bolz-Weber's autobiography of worry includes these highlights:

"As a child I worried a lot about quicksand. To be fair, the TV shows I watched made it seem like more of a potential danger than it has proven to be. As a teenager I worried that the Soviet Union would drop nuclear bombs on us but I was equally worried that I wouldn't get tickets to see Depeche Mode.

Then I was told to worry that Y2K was going to make airplanes just sort of drop out of the sky. When 9-11 happened I for sure worried the terrorist attacks would just keep going. Then when the economic collapse happened in 2008 I was entirely free from worry because I was entirely free of money. So it was very a relaxing time for me.

But then I worried that people would think less of me when I got divorced, only to realize they didn't think that much of me to begin with."

You get the picture. We all have our own autobiographies of worry.

Part of what writing her autobiography of worry did for Bolz-Weber, was to help her realize

“how worrying about what might happen didn’t do one thing to make her feel safe, or to prevent bad things from happening or to ensure that good things did.”

She says, “It really only kept me from being present to the gifts of the day I was in.”

The intersection between avoiding despair like it owes you money, contemplating your own autobiography of worry, and Christmas, is that in Christmas, we’re celebrating that the dominant powers, the powers of the world, are not ultimate powers. Throughout the scriptures, we hear that God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We read that God is the one who was, who is, and who is to come. This is the core of the lyrics of Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus. This can help remind us:

“that this moment we are in is a very small moment in a very big story. A story of God and God’s people that reaches back to the beginning of time, brushes the skin of the present and moves on into a future we cannot see.”

(Bolz-Weber)

You see, most of us are at our most anxious when we invest ourselves too fully in some Johnny-come-lately story. Yes, our struggles are real, and it is the mission of the church to address those struggles. But Jesus also admonishes us not to worry, to “consider the lilies, how they neither toil nor spin.”

We gather today to celebrate Christmas, to center ourselves in:

“the God who spoke everything into creation,
who breathed into dust to create us,
who brought water from a rock and manna from heaven,
who led a people out of slavery,
the God who spoke through wild prophets and questionable women,
who came and broke our hearts like only a baby could do,
who cried at a friend’s tomb
and ate with all the wrong people
and wouldn’t shut up about forgiveness,
this is the God who defeated death and promises to be with us.
This God is braided into all time.”

(Bolz-Weber)

Compassion

Along with celebrating the God of all time and space and recognizing our place in salvation history, Christmas also invites us into recognizing the divine in the particular, in this time and this place. Do you remember the opening scene of the 1997 movie, “Contact?” (If you do, I suspect it’s only because, as the story goes, the fictional protagonist grew up in De Pere.) It’s really just an okay movie, but the opening scene is brilliant, in which we are hurtled through a fast paced montage of images that start with the widest possible view of the Big Bang and propel

us at lighting speed, honing in closer and closer and closer until we're looking through the bedroom window of a science-obsessed middle schooler.

Similarly, Christmas invites us to both zoom waaaaaay out to the Alpha and the Omega and waaaaaay in to a child born in poverty to an unwed teen which is witnessed by low-wage third shifters.

In an article in the New York Times last year, Peter Wehner, the former speechwriter for Ronald Regan and both George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush, wrote that: "Jesus ushered in a compassion revolution. Before Jesus, compassion was primarily thought of as a weakness."

Wehner goes on,

"Of all the qualities that the New Testament ascribes to God, compassion is among the most shocking. Compassion has nothing to do with power, with immortality or with immutability, which is what many people think of when they contemplate God's qualities. The Greek gods of myth who lived on Mt. Olympus were defined by many things, but compassion was not high among them."

"For much of antiquity, feeling the pain of others was regarded as a weakness."

(John Dickson, professor of biblical studies and public Christianity at Wheaton College)

Wehner continues:

"In the Gospels, we repeatedly read of the compassion of Jesus for those suffering physically and emotionally, for those 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.'"

"The most moving examples of Jesus' compassion were his responses to outsiders, especially those deemed unworthy, unclean or unfit. 'In taking on their "outsider status" with them,' Dr. Kerry Dearborn told me, 'he reflected his deep love and solidarity with them, and his willingness to suffer with them. Jesus not only healed them,' she said, 'he also took on their alienation.'"

Conclusion

Friends, tonight we celebrate the birth of Jesus, but we're really celebrating so much more. We're celebrating the God of all time and place. We're celebrating the sacredness embodied in a poor, weak, defenseless infant. We're celebrating the divinity of compassion. And while I won't judge you if your tradition is to serve a birthday cake for Jesus, my prayer is that you'll also serve a generous portion of eternal compassion.

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