

SOBER INTOXICATION

I want to begin today by showing you a video, a very brief video of children telling the Christmas story. I want to set it up so that you can get the full impact of it.

A church took a video recording of a group of children telling their version, or their understanding of the Christmas story. There were obviously several groups of children doing this, two by two. Then, adults acted out what these children said lip-synching the children's words. So, you will see adults moving their mouths but hear what the children are saying.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suowe2czxcA&sns=em>)

The title I have given to what you are about to hear is Sober Intoxication. As I mentioned in the preview, this phrase is not original with me. You will, however, notice that many spiritual teachers and masters in all traditions make frequent use of oxymoronic language in their teachings. For example, Richard Rohr refers to “falling upward,” “breathing under water” and “dancing standing still.”

Most people in the Western World get intoxicated with and by the Christmas season and the joy of the season. It is impossible, unless you are a combination of Scrooge and an unrepentant Grinch, not to be moved by the video you just saw.

The priest who has preached the Lenten and Advent services at the Vatican since 1980, his name is Raniero Cantalamessa, he is a Franciscan, has written a book, “Sober Intoxication of the Spirit: Filled With the Fullness of God.” There is a section in this book where he gives an interpretation of one version of the two narratives we have of Jesus birth, this one from Luke. He points out that Luke's version tells not only about the circumstances but also the people involved. And, further, Luke's account, much more than Matthew's, recreates the atmosphere and state of mind in which this story takes place.

As I mentioned last week, there is no human language adequate to explain a “God experience.” One of the most prominent elements of Luke's story is that of joy. From beginning to end, this is the case. I'm using some lines from Cantalamessa's

work. When the angel tells Zechariah about the coming of John the Baptist, he says he will have “joy and gladness” at the birth of his son and that many others will rejoice. When Mary went to see Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb “leaped for joy.” When Mary herself is informed she is to give birth her response is, “My spirit rejoices in God.” This joy spreads around the cradles of both John and Jesus so that at the birth of Jesus angels sing to shepherds: “We bring you good news of great joy.”

“Luke’s account is not about just a few scattered mentions of joy but rather about a steady stream of quiet, profound joy. It is an example of the sober intoxication of the Spirit. The people’s joy is a true spiritual intoxication, but it is also sober. They do not exalt themselves; they are not concerned about having a more or less important role in the kingdom of God that is beginning. Nor are they concerned about seeing its end; Simeon, for instance, says that the Lord can now allow him to depart in peace.”

One of the things I want to get to in my own teaching is accessing this joy - and, peace and love. Where does it come from? It is clear that there was something about what those early followers of Jesus had experienced in him that gave them peace, love and joy. And that they, by and through their transformed lives, touched and transformed the lives of others.

Joy comes when we are awakened to the birth of the Sacred within our own lives. This is what the Christmas stories are really about and we miss it if we either dismiss them as simply religious fairy tales or embrace them as if they are historical factual reports. Joy does not come from the outside. This is one of the fundamental meanings of what Christian theology refers to as “the incarnation.” God is in the world. Not out there sitting on a cloud somewhere. Not a God who miraculously intervenes in lives and history at whim but a Sacred Reality that is with us, which is what the word “Emmanuel” means.

And, though this is not the main point of this talk, what those early followers of Jesus knew, because they saw it in him, is this: because this joy did not come from the outside, it could not be extinguished - even by death. It is this realization, the reality of suffering and the ability of love to be stronger than any darkness, that gives joyful intoxication its sobriety.

I have taken last week and today to try to free the Christmas stories from their Western cultural confines so that we might be able to access their true meanings. Of course, first, we have to know what these stories meant for those who created them and then what those story tellers meant to convey by them.

Perhaps the Christmas story is the one of the best known stories in the world. They certainly form the foundation for the world's most widely celebrated holiday. Not even Easter comes close. Of course, not only is Christmas a religious holiday around the world, it is also the holiday of much of the world's true religion - consumerism. Christmas is the only holiday in the American calendar that is not only a religious holiday but also a federal holiday. I'm not saying Christmas is the most "sacred" time in the Christian year. That honor belongs to Easter. I'm just saying its celebration is bigger.

There is obviously profound emotional power in these stories. Notice your reaction to the opening video. Or, at the service this afternoon. Or, at any one of the Christmas Eve services next week. Or, at any number of the programs on TV offered during the season.

When we begin to see the Christmas stories in their original context, they are not only profoundly personal stories but also they are disturbingly political. Perhaps not for us so much because over the centuries this cutting edge has been dulled to a bluntness that makes it almost impossible to feel. The stories may boast of "Tidings of Comfort and Joy," but, when properly heard, they are edgy and challenging.

We have, as I said last week, only two narrative accounts of the birth of Jesus. They are found in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. If you want to go beyond what you heard last week and what you will hear today, I could not refer you to a finer source than the book by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan titled "The First Christmas." This is a good Christmas gift idea.

Not only am I interested in what these stories meant but also what they mean today. They meant something in the context of the Roman Empire in which they were created. But also, they mean something now. America is in the powerful and

perilous position of being the empire of our day. Jesus and the stories created about him were both powerfully anti-imperial.

To quote from “The First Christmas,” “What does it mean to affirm with the Christmas stories that Jesus is the Son of God (and the emperor is not), that Jesus is the savior of the world (and the emperor is not), that Jesus is Lord (and the emperor is not), that Jesus is the way to peace on earth (and the emperor is not.)?”

The consensus of contemporary scholarship is that the stories we have of the birth of Jesus were not only fairly late in being written but also they are considered to be parables. They are not eyewitness news reports. You can go to the web and read last week’s talk. I won’t repeat that here except to say that the two stories we have of Jesus’ birth are astonishingly different.

All people grow up being taught that what their tribe teaches them about the way the world is, especially about other tribes, is the truth. This is a built-in survival skill.

I was taught that my country was the best and that my religion was the correct one. I grew up in the Protestant side of the Christian religion - Christianity is very divisive both externally and internally. There are about 33,000 different religious denominations in the world. The way I was taught to deal with this was to say that if someone else’s religion was really different from mine, I would say it was impossible. When someone else would say that about mine, I would claim that mine was unique.

Just as a side note: the claim that Christianity is a unique religion is a fairly new historical development. Further, it is a position one can hang on to only by refusing to move out of the knowledge and information levels of knowing.

My teaching and Ordinary Life generally is about waking up to the beauty of “what is” in all of its glorious ordinariness. Our spiritual work is about creating a space where our true Selves can grow into the kind of seeing that goes far beyond mere looking at to recognizing. “Recognizing” means “re knowing.” We seek freedom from the traps of our low levels of perception and preoccupations. Jesus,

and those who told stories about Jesus, were not telling us “what” to see but “how” to see what we behold.

When we resume here after the first of the year, my intention is to offer a series of talks that amplifies on this very point. Either I am still asked by some people or some of you are asked about me by others, things like, “Do you believe in the virgin birth?” “Do you believe in miracles?” “Do you believe the Bible is ‘the Word of God’?”

We have in the birth stories miraculous events that are alleged to occur - a star appears over the home where Mary and Joseph live, Mary is a virgin when she conceives Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. By the way, not only was Mary a virgin but, according to Catholic doctrine, Mary’s mother, Anne, was also a virgin. That is what the doctrine of the immaculate conception means. Also, just like Jesus, Mary was wafted up into heaven.

Many people look at these sorts of things and say, “That could never happen. It never did happen. It never will happen.” This is called “the impossibility option.”

If I told you that this morning I flew to church, you would likely know immediately that I didn’t spout wings and fly like a bird here. It meant, I lost track of time and had to rush to get here on time.

On the other hand, some people approach stories like the virgin birth and say, “Well, I know, it is improbable but it did happen once to our Jesus back there that one time in history.” This is called “the uniqueness option.”

In my opinion both of these options are wrong.

In the pre-enlightenment world, it was culturally accepted that these things could happen. Gods could come down from heaven, have sex with humans and sire divine beings. Caesar was considered to have been divinely conceived and, at his death, he rose from his funeral pyre into heaven.

Let me tell you a story:

A remarkable man lived some 2,000 years ago. Before he was born, his mother knew he would not be a normal child. An angelic visitor had told her that her son would be divine. Miraculous signs and wonders accompanied his birth and as a child he was religiously precocious. As an adult, he left home to engage in an itinerant preaching ministry, teaching his good news that people should live for spiritual, not the material things of this world. He gathered disciples and did miracles to confirm them in their faith. He raised the ire of many of those in power, who had him brought up on charges before the Roman authorities. Even after he left this world, though, his followers claimed that he had ascended to heaven and that they had seen him alive afterwards. They wrote books about his life. Some of these writings survive to this day.

Though it sounds familiar, that is not the story of Jesus. That is the story of Apollonius of Tyana. He was a famous neo-Pythagorean philosopher of the first century. He lived about the same time as Jesus of Nazareth and though they didn't know each other, their followers knew each other and often engaged in heated debates about who was superior - Jesus or Apollonius.

If you and I had been living in the pre-enlightened world and had heard the Luke story about Jesus being born of a virgin, heard about the wise men, the magical star and so forth; our reactions would have been one of two things:

Had we been Jewish, we would have known where the lines that built the story came from. That's how the stories of Jesus were put together, in light of Jewish liturgical worship that took place in the decades after the death of Jesus.

Had we not been Jewish, we would have said, "That's cool. So what? What does that have to do with me?" That is, "You better have more than that to say if you want me to pay attention to this guy. Besides, the coffee and 'sacred cookies' at the Temple of Diana are better."

The people who created these stories were Jewish geniuses. They were not stupid or naive.

Just by accident we happened upon a television program on PBS last Monday night. We only caught the last half hour or so. The title of the program was

“Ancient Roads: From Christ to Constantine.” Later I looked it up and it is a brief series that seeks to answer the question about how the small group of Jesus followers grew to being the dominant religion in the Western world.

The program is very well done. So much so that I went on Amazon and bought the DVD. There were biblical scholars from prestigious places from around the world. Amazing art work, much of which you have likely seen. And, there were very well done “on location” scenes from all the historical places you might imagine. I am looking forward to seeing the entire program.

The problem is that the gospel accounts are treated as most people have unconsciously come to accept them - as “eye-witness-news” accounts. The writings we have in the Gospels are not only NOT historical accounts but are memories of Jesus followers and these memories are shaped by decades of Jewish synagogue tradition and liturgy.

When I was in seminary formally studying how the writings that we have in the Christian collection came about, we were encouraged to put great faith and trust in something called “oral tradition.” Oral tradition says that Jesus said and did some things that his followers not only remembered but also passed along faithfully, some folks say “without error,” from one group to another, from one generation to another.

The scholars are pretty much agreed that the first narrative we have in the collection of accepted Christian writings is a document we call “Mark.” Many assume that some individual named Mark wrote it. Actually, we don’t know who the author was. What the scholars are fairly unanimous about is that Mark was written sometime in the sixties and consists of the oral tradition that was available to the writer at the time. Mark’s purpose is to explain the crucifixion of Jesus and the transformative experience among the Jesus followers that we call resurrection. Most scholars put the date of Jesus execution around the year 30. So that leaves us with three decades between the death of Jesus and the writing of Mark.

What happened during those three decades? I don’t know how good you are in your ability to recall things that happened thirty years ago. I know that Sherry and I will come back from what both of us agree has been a wonderful trip, like the St.

Nicholas Pilgrimage we went on this past Spring. I will overhear her tell someone an experience we had on the trip and think, “Did we go on the same trip?” Or, I will tell some story of my experience and she will say, “That’s not what happened at all!”

What did the followers of Jesus do after his death?

In order to answer that question we have to journey into the Jewish world out of which Jesus and his first followers emerged. You may think it foolish or unnecessary that I keep stressing the fact that Jesus was a Jew. Many people, however, seem unaware of this. Certainly it has not been, in my opinion, properly taught in Christian education. Without knowing Jewish scriptures, Jewish customs, Jewish liturgies, Jewish expectations, Jewish life in the part of the world and at the time Jesus had his ministry, we will be left with a huge misunderstanding.

This is exactly what non-Jewish concepts have done to Jesus and his teachings. The effort to establish the Jesus movement as something very distinct from Judaism is one of the things that led to the blatant anti-Semitic teachings that can be found even in the Christian Testament, especially in the Gospel of John.

We must also, echoing those two questions having to do with Identity and Destiny - God, who are you? And, God, who am I? - go past this history and go deep into our own humanity, which is one of the things the “new-physics” is leading us toward. Can we learn to see Jesus apart from any religion? If we can’t do that, we are at risk of our religion and religious biases blinding us to the true nature of Jesus and to the content of his teaching.

Jesus told parables.

What is the most important part of a parable? Whether it is literally true or its “more than literal truth” meaning?

Jesus made his stories up. No one who heard him tell one of his masterful stories ever interrupted him by saying, “Hey, you’re making that stuff up.” If a person had done that, someone standing next to him would have elbowed him in the side and

said, “Would you shut up! You’re missing the point.” Actually, the stories Jesus told are so full of truth we are still struggling to hear them.

His followers told parables about Jesus. They made them up. Not that they weren’t true. They are packed with truth.

John Dominic Crossan, who is the foremost living authority on Jesus tells his own parable about Jesus:

“Three people once heard Jesus speak. One went away saying, ‘I don’t get it. This isn’t for me.’ A second person said, ‘Oh, I got it alright and his message is threatening to my way of life. He must be destroyed.’ The third person, having heard the very same words as the other two, declared, ‘In this man and what he says, I experience God. I will follow him.’”

I imagine this was rather typical. Some, perhaps most at the time, simply ignored him. Obviously, he really upset those in power because those in power had him killed. Others, others who turned out to be the truly more powerful because they took what he had to say, put it into practice and turned the world upside.

A light desires to be seen shining in the darkness of our times and lives. Our religious and spiritual work is about discerning this light and developing the resources - that is, the will and the faith - to live in the light and be guided by the light.

In the Jewish narrative of creation, the first thing God creates is light. This light, by the way, was not the light of the sun, moon or stars. These are not created until the fourth day. This is primordial light - light that existed before the sun, moon and stars. Light symbolizes the presence of God. They called Jesus the light of the world. According to Jewish hopes, light was God’s dream for the world. To live in light rather than darkness.

This, by the way, was the original meaning of salvation. People were to be saved, not from their sins, but from the bondage of living in the dark. Salvation was, originally, not about going to heaven when you die but about being set free to live in the light of God’s love and justice in this world.

The Christmas stories are full of light. And, at Christmas we sing about it -

Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.

Or,

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining.

Here is the symbol in the parable: In the middle of the night, on the longest night of the year, the time of deepest darkness, Jesus is born.

You know, when it is dark, we stumble around and get easily lost. When someone doesn't have a clue what is going on, we say, "He's in the dark."

Further, in the dark we are often afraid.

In spiritual language we talk about seeking enlightenment or being enlightened. In the kind of psychology that makes the most sense to me we talk about bringing things out from the shadows into the light.

The people who created and told the parables of Jesus birth valued the coming of light, they longed for the coming of an ideal Savior who would uphold justice in the face of Rome's empire of injustice and oppression. In Judaism, there is the festival of Hanukkah, an eight day celebration of light as the winter solstice approaches.

It is this context of the powerful symbols of light and darkness that had developed from the beginning of human consciousness that Matthew and Luke write their parables to introduce the story each of them wants to tell about Jesus. They are saying in these parables, "We want to introduce you to Jesus who wants to introduce you to God who wants to enlighten our world by enlightening our lives."

Is our a dark time? Do we need to live in the light more? Is there stuff in the shadow of our lives that not only we do not see but also don't know about but which makes - in spite of our not knowing it - tremendous decisions for us?

If you are in the dark and someone brings a light, your instinctual response is joy. If you have been yearning and longing for something and that yearning and longing are met, the response is joy.

The angelic message to the shepherds was: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people.”

In very different ways both Matthew and Luke are saying in their telling of the Jesus story that they, along with those other early followers of Jesus, had found in Jesus, in his teachings, and especially in the way he set people free in hope, a strength for a different way of life and a different kind of world; that they had found in who he was and what he taught, the life of compassion and justice he offered, a light for the darkness of their time.

If we seek to follow Jesus, we are called to bring enlarged being into the world. That is to say, we are called to bring the gifts of love and freedom, peace and joy into not only the dark places of our lives but also into the dark places of this world.

If we dare let ourselves be touched by the truth of this story, we will be intoxicated with joy.

If we dare let our lives be enlightened by the truth of this story, we can be spiritually sober enough to make a difference to the places on this earth where we live out our lives, knowing that both the earth and all who live upon it belong to the God of Jesus.

Joy to the world.

Merry Christmas to you.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.