



I had occasion this week to reflect on my history at St. Paul's. Some generous benefactor arranged for all the clergy to have breakfast together at a fairly upscale restaurant. There are nine clergy on staff here. The next day this same benefactor catered the entire staff Christmas lunch that was held in this very room. There were about fifty people at that gathering. This is a huge operation. Some people you never see but their work is indispensable. A lot of these people have served this church for fifteen or twenty years. I myself have been here over twenty six years.

Not all of the clergy could be at that breakfast. All but two were there - four women and three guys. Gail Williford and I are certainly senior in terms of longevity.

I went to that breakfast with an agenda. I'll tell you about it in a moment.

After we had ordered and settled down our senior minister, Tommy Williams, asked Gail and I to recount some of the early days of our time here - especially embarrassing moments and gaffs.

The one Gail told about didn't happen to her. It was something that occurred during a wedding that Terry Thompson did here. Terry served this church for thirty years and was, and is, much beloved.

This particular wedding was a large one. It was what we refer to as a choir wedding. That is to say, the bride

- actually her father - pays additional wedding fees to have the choir sing at the wedding. The choir donates their time and the money goes to help defray expenses on some choir trip in the future.

This was a huge wedding and the bride wanted for them to exchange vows in the chancel and not on the main floor of the sanctuary, which makes things much easier. The church was packed, the bridal party was large and the bride dressed in an expensive and full dress. At the part of the service where Terry leads them up into the chancel and they follow, the bride stepped onto the front of her wedding dress pulling the top of it down nearly to her waist. Terry's head snapped up to look at the ceiling. The choir members eyes got big as pie plates. The bride calmly corrected this wardrobe malfunction. No one else seemed to notice.

Jim Bankston used to use a line in his wedding homily that said, "This wedding will soon be over but the marriage will last forever." On this particular incident we recalled, he got the sentence inverted. He said, "This marriage will soon be over but the wedding will last forever." He said it did.

My memories also involved weddings. I once did a wedding here where the mother of the bride was so intoxicated by the time she got here that she had to be virtually carried down the aisle by two of the groomsmen.

Not too long ago when the bride got to me in the processional I realized that she herself was plastered. Not only did she slur her words in repeating the vows but at one point stopped me during the service and said, "Would you please repeat that." The groom was holding her steady.

We could all recall horrible things that happened to other clergy. The unconscious is merciful enough to allow us to block most such gaffs of our own from memory. There have been books written about bloopers in church bulletins and the horror stories about children's sermons gone wrong are as plentiful as the stars in the sky.

My agenda for breakfast that morning involved this: Thirty years ago, just shortly before Sherry and I began attending here, there were fewer people in the first service - we only had two then - than there are now in the choir. The average age of the congregation was 68. Now the church takes in new members every week and the average age is 34.

This is a vibrant and vital place and people are drawn to it for all sorts of reasons. When Sherry and I first became a part of St. Paul's, we lived in Clear Lake and probably drove by thirty or forty other churches to attend this one.

I've said stuff like this in some of my talks before and someone who is a long distant attendee of this gathering recently contacted me and wanted to know why I thought this was so. He himself is a member of a large downtown Methodist in another city and the church is dying. Congregants are, as he put it, fleeing to Bible churches and mega churches with the claim that they are attracted to the children's program elsewhere. He, and I, sense it is something else.

So the question I put to the breakfast group was "why do you think St. Paul's is such a bubble?" There are very few churches anywhere in this city, for example, where a gathering like this could convene. In the early days of my teaching about the Jesus of history and the dangers of Fundamentalism, I would have people say to

me things like, "Do they know what you are teaching over here?" One person said, before never returning, "All you are doing is debunking the Bible.

Gail and I identified three critical things that had to happen for St. Paul's to become what it is today.

First, is a commitment to excellence in worship. Credit for that goes to John Fellers. When John came to St. Paul's in 1976, St. Paul's was a dying church. John brought with him a commitment to liturgical worship and excellence in music. One of the things John did was rip out the carpets and install the great organ we have in the chancel now. Up until then the chancel area was dark and for foreboding.

Though John obviously had support for doing these things, changes don't come easy for churches. John hired Frances Anderson and Bob Brewer who built the great choir we have today and established a firm tradition of excellence in music.

After John came Wayne Day. In the official history of the church, written to celebrate St. Paul's 100th anniversary, are these words: "No individual was more responsible for revitalizing the church than Dr. K. Wayne Day, who became pastor in 1985."

Wayne is the reason Sherry and I first attended and then became a part of St. Paul's. Wayne is the one who brought me onto the staff to teach and participate in worship. So, the second thing that makes St. Paul's such a bubble, is the explicit commitment Wayne had to growing the church by 200 members a year. Wayne would do this through an emphasis on outreach and education.

A third factor contributing to the character, growth and vitality of St. Paul's was what Jim Bankston

brought to St. Paul's by his emphasis on inclusivity, interfaith involvement and the courageous stands he took.

Jim is the one who brought the staff together to come up with the mission and identity statement, "St. Paul's is a sacred space in the heart of Houston where people seek, find and respond to God's love and grace." We came up with that collectively as a staff in a day long retreat that Jim convened early in his ministry here.

Jim was personally attacked by his fellow clergy for the stands he took on full inclusion of gays and lesbians not only here but in the denomination.

As I said, churches for the most part don't take to change easily. When I first started serving in worship here 25 years ago, there was a cartoon on a cork board in the sacristy. It showed a man being led to execution. He is obviously a minister. The executioner is asking him, "What did you do?" He responds, "I made a change in the order of service."

I have brought this history up because the wonderful opportunities we have here for worship, study and service came because of leadership willing to do things that went against the grain of what was comfortable and expected at the time. I've learned in my teaching ministry here that you don't trifle with people's accepted understanding of sacred stories and there is, perhaps, no story more sacred to people than that of the Christmas story. However, one of the assumptions I make in my approach to understanding Sacred Mystery and how we can nurture our relationship to it is this: A misunderstood Jesus leads to a misunderstood God.

I love what are called mountain top experiences and I get them very frequently in the context of St. Paul's.

One of the reasons for the long introduction today is that these mountain top experiences do not and would not come to us here had it not been for the courageous and sometimes difficult stands taken by those who worked hard to make what we have here available to us.

There is no phrase that is popular in our vocabulary that has such direct biblical roots as "mountain top experiences." We have this expression because there are so many incidents in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures where people had experiences with Sacred Mystery on a mountain top. The phrase means a moment of transcendence.

The most significant is what is called "the mount of transfiguration." In this class today I'm going to say that we have the choice of doing the work to have that kind of mountaintop experience or to be "king of the hill."

Mountaintop cartoons of the guru on top of the mountain abound.

Mountaintop experiences are intended to sustain us as we go into the living of Ordinary Life. Basking in the wonderful story of Jesus can lead us, if we misunderstand it, to miss or dismiss what the end of the story meant for Jesus and what it might mean for us to do as he did - nurture our relationship with Sacred Mystery by treating others as we would like to be treated. One of you said to me after I mentioned this principle in here a couple of weeks ago that the way what we've come to know as the Golden rule is used in community organizing is "do unto others as they would have done unto themselves."

The questions I raised last week in looking at the Christmas stories told by Matthew and Luke were: What

did Matthew and Luke intend their hearers to understand when they told their very different parables that introduce the telling of the life and teaching of Jesus? How would those who first heard them understand not just the stories of Jesus' birth but also the stories that Matthew and Luke were about to unfold?

Further, what might it be about who we are, what we have, how we structure our lives that helps or, more than likely, hinders our understanding these stories - or any of the biblical material for that matter?

Here is something that I notice to be true about me and I'll bet it is true about you as well. I can be so blind about so much all the while claiming that I am seeing clearly. When I am confronted by material about myself that challenges my self-perceptions I can deflect, dispute, deny, defend with incredible ease.

If you were to ask a hundred people to whom the angel announced the conception of Jesus, I'd be willing to wager that most of them would say, "To Mary." But, in the story that scholars say developed first in history, it was to Joseph that the angel came and said, "Mary has conceived a child."

The birth stories, as is true with much of Christian Scripture, have been either so misunderstood or trivialized that it is appalling! There was a church sign I saw some time ago that illustrates this trivialization. It said, "Jesus: The Original Wonder Bread." I know I showed this to you two weeks ago but this is so much of what our culture has come to understand and believe about the Christmas story. (Here was shown a picture of Santa kneeling over baby Jesus in the manger.)

The nativity scene is itself a parable. It is meant to convey the humble beginnings of the Christian movement. Virtually nothing in our nativity scenes is in the Bible - not the animals, not the kings, no camels. What the Bible says is that when the wise men, likely astrologers, eventually get to Jesus he is a young child - probably two years of age or later.

Let's suppose we had attended a festive gathering during the later part of the first century. The equivalent of one of our holiday office parties. Good food was all around, toasts were offered, songs were sung. We would sing praise to the Lord, the Son of God, The One who is the Bringer of Peace, the Savior of the World.

That would not be Jesus we were paying homage to. No, it would have been Caesar. There was even a phrase that had been in use for some time - The Kingdom of God. It referred to the Roman Empire. It means a mode of economic distribution, a type of human organization and a style of social justice and peace.

The Christmas stories are set in the context of a time when Rome was the imperial power. The way the Roman Empire expressed its power was through force and violence. For example, around the time Jesus was born - and the best historical guess of the time of his birth is around 4 BC - there was a rebellion of Jews against Rome. One rebellious movement was successful and you can read all about it in the book of Maccabees. Most such rebellions were not successful and one around the time of the birth of Jesus took place in a town just a half a day's walk from Nazareth in Sepphoria where the entire town was destroyed and over 2,000 men crucified. Jesus would have been told all about this in his growing up.



Just a few people at the top controlled the wealth. The top few had a monopoly on labor and production. The political system favored the wealthy and was also a monopoly. It was the empire that gave meaning and interpretation to everything. The famous Pax Romana - that term comes from Edward Gibbon's massive work, "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire - was a peace that came only through victory. Victory was possible only through war. War was waged as violently as possible. By the way, Augustus, the ruler, was declared divine while he was alive.

Any of these things remotely sound like our country? Capitalism has been wonderfully effective at generating wealth. But, as the most recent issue of "The Week" cites (12/20/2013 pp. 3 & 4) it falls short in spreading it around. Globalization, technology and other modern economic forces have opened a widening chasm between the wealthy and every one else. Labor has been devalued; a willingness to work hard no longer guarantees a place in the middle class - or even a job.

In a system that produces big winners and lots of losers, what becomes of the losers? Pope Francis has caused a stir by emphasizing the point that we have somehow got to see and deal with the suffering of those at the bottom. He scoffed at trickle-down economics as a cruel fiction and decried the "idolatry of money" and the "globalization of indifference."

Nelson Mandela, who died last week, once said, "Overcoming poverty is not a task of charity. It is an act of justice." That is part of the message of the Christmas stories.

The top 1 percent of families in the U.S. now have a net worth 288 times that of the average family. The top 5 percent control 72 percent of the nation's wealth.

Even worse, the inequality of opportunity now makes it harder than ever for the poor to escape their circumstances.

It is Luke who has Mary sing when she discovered she is pregnant these words:

Keep in mind the context: These early followers of Jesus are Jews. The Jews were at the bottom of the heap. They were oppressed and without power or resources or prestige or possessions. Context is important. Here is Mary's song:

\* \* \*

I am bursting with God-news;  
I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.  
God took one good like at me, and look what happened -  
I am the most fortunate woman on earth!  
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,  
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all  
others.  
His mercy flows in wave after wave  
on those who are in awe before him.  
He bared his arm and showed his strength,  
scattered the bluffing braggarts.  
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,  
pulled victims out of the mud.  
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;  
the callous rich were left out in the cold.  
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;  
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them  
high.  
It's exactly what he promised,  
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

\* \* \*

Here is the way most of us remember Mary's song:

\* \* \*

God has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the  
thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful  
from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with  
good things,  
and send the rich away empty.

\* \* \*

This is not the sort of thing those at the top want to hear.

So both Matthew and Luke are going to apply to Jesus the titles of Lord, Son of God, Bringer of Peace and Savior of the world. To use these labels in that context about anyone other than the emperor was an act of treason.

All of us, without exception, come out of the womb and as we do so we are given a script and told to follow it carefully. It takes a huge amount of work to wake up to the fact that we are so imprisoned, trapped.

I was born into a white Protestant, Christian, American family. And I am male. All of these things are such traps. I knew early on that I could have been born into some other configuration. But I lucked out. I got born with a set of labels that either made me right or gave me power. That is what I believed because that is what I was taught to believe. Such arrogance!

Our country is full of arrogant stances about so much? What makes us think it is okay to invade someone else's country? Now the casualties of war mostly women and children.

One of my most favorite things to do, and I get to do it about once at year, is to go to BookPeople. BookPeople is a bookstore in Austin, Texas that is one of the greatest bookstores in this country. I love to go and just wander around looking at what's new and what I don't know about. If I'm lucky a book will call my name as I walk by and I'll go up and introduce myself. This happened the Saturday after Thanksgiving this year.

I spotted, looked at and bought a book: "How the Church Betrays the Gospel: The unreasonable dimension of the teaching and example of Jesus." The author has been a combat pilot, an active duty military chaplain, a Mennonite minister, and currently serves with Christian Peacemaker Teams in Iraq. CPT is an international human rights organization envisioned by the historic peace churches and dedicated to reduce violence and to restore relationships damaged by injury and suffering.

After serving in Viet Nam as a fighter pilot in support of Special Forces he had experiences that led him to separate from active duty in order to attend seminary. I want to read to you some of his own journey:

\* \* \*

While in seminary I entered the military chaplain training program. After earning a MDiv and PhD and serving two years as a reserve chaplain I reentered the Air Force as an active duty chaplain. Initially my contribution was highly commendable, ensuring I would move up through the ranks with ease. While serving an

overseas assignment I worked to complete the highest level of professional military education courses.

I read materials that informed me of the manner in which politicians and business interests of the United States dictate the use of military forces to their advantage. I read articles describing how the armed forces are deployed to maintain access to regions in the international community containing resources our nation has identified as being in our vital interests. These pursuits are carried out without serious regard for how the consequences of this engagement affect the lives of people native to these regions.

At this moment for the first time I realized the dynamic of international conflict. I understood that the United States' presence in areas where they were unwelcome created resentment in the local people. Resentment eventually leads to resistance, and resistance would often erupt into violence. The routine practice of the United States has been to engage the military forces to repress the conflict and to impose a predetermined solution that insures that our vital interests and national security will be preserved."

\* \* \*

This book, by the way, was written before the invasion of Iraq.

We cannot have mountaintop experiences if we are not willing to get to the bottom of things. Sometimes this can be uncomfortable.

The fact is, however, that when a person loses the ability to be self-critical - we call it denial, that person loses the ability to be, to be authentic, to be

real, to live with integrity. The same thing is also true of a group - like a church or a nation.

There is so much that the church universal has done or supported that is so absolutely unlike the teachings of Jesus.

Again, the context of the birth of Jesus and the beginning of the Christian movement was peace through violence and wealth controlled by the few. Our context is so similar.

Matthew and Luke are about to unfold their version of the Jesus story that we have been looking at for a long time now. The Jesus story is about a different way of seeing and experiencing the world, each other and Sacred Mystery. The story wants to turn our lives upside down. For example, Jesus didn't come to free the oppressed. He came to free the oppressors.

These birth stories that are put in front of the good news about Jesus are not, when first heard in their context, comforting little tales about a baby Jesus. That is so much easier for us to embrace. These stories are stories that confront. They challenge. They are seeking, in the purest sense of the word, to convert people. They are saying, "Change your mind about what makes for peace, about who and what rules your life, about who God really is and what God's kingdom looks like."

These stories are saying, "We are talking about the end of injustice, the end of violence, the end of imperialism. We are talking about, not peace through victory, but peace through justice."

The world that Jesus taught about was not a democracy. It was family. He pictured God as father whose desire

is to provide equally for all the family of the earth equally. Which means enough for everyone.

Mountaintop experiences are not likely to be more than a flash in the pan unless they are born out of a willingness to be silent enough to listen and to be willing to join Jesus in praying, "Thy will be done - not mine."

Here is the mountain top experience that Matthew and Luke build their birth stories on. It is from Isaiah:

\* \* \*

In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

\* \* \*

Context is so important in hearing not only the birth stories of about Jesus but the Jesus story itself. One way of trying to maintain peace and order is through means that always lead to violence of some sort. The other is picking up an ethic that seeks to treat others as we ourselves want to be treated.

Which way to peace, do you think, is announced by these Christmas stories? When Luke's angels announce "peace on earth" to those shepherds is it peace through violent victory or is it peace through justice?

Being "king of the mountain" is one path. Being on the "mount of transfiguration" is another.

I wish for you and yours and for all people everywhere this to be a season for the rebirth of wonder, love, hope, joy and - most of all - of peace.

Merry Christmas.

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