

The “Therefore” of Christmas

Isaiah 49:1-6

Luke 2:21-40

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

After we have sated our bodies with food, our patience with relatives and our credit cards with debt, we who also were witnesses to God’s coming toward us in the weak unarmed wise of a child are finally left to wonder about what his birth means: to ask after the “therefore” of Christmas, not only for ourselves but, in these mean times, to ask urgently for the sake of the whole world. Luke leads us to do just this in the story of Jesus’ first public appearance.

Luke’s first “therefore” has to do with what Jesus’ birth compels his parents to do. They travel to Jerusalem from the stable in Bethlehem, and enter the temple to begin Jesus’ life in the community that will tell him who he is. Luke wants his readers, especially his Gentile readers, to see from the beginning that salvation has come to us through a Jew: a Jew whose mother engages in the ritual act of purification after his birth, and whose father spends shekels they do not have to buy two doves, a poor man’s sacrifice on the occasion of Jesus’ presentation to the priest. We read no less than five times that Mary and Joseph, of the house and lineage of David, did everything required by the law except for one ominous thing: the substitution offering to redeem their first born son from being sacrificed was missing. The “therefore” of Christmas for Luke was the cross.

Because of Christ’s birth, we also bring our children into the sanctuary to begin their lives in the midst of the people who will tell them who they are. If you were in the congregation for the first service on Christmas Eve, you know that is so. The God who brought the Israelites out of Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead is their God too. Sunday after Sunday, we bring them to hear the story of God’s saving purposes told as a counter story to the story they hear, day in and day out, a story that glorifies violence and greed, a story that traffics in fear and hatred. In the waters of baptism, our ritual of presentation, their lives are marked with the sign and seal of new birth into a life that death cannot finally threaten or end.

But because Christ was born, they also know in him the human being they were created to be and are destined to be in him. His vulnerability, his complete self-giving, his humility, the company he keeps with the outcast and the sinner, his outrageous justice, his love that never quits: this is the therefore of Christmas in a world that would tell our children otherwise, that would have them believe invulnerability, self-importance, boasting, bullying, social rank, academic prowess, selfish gain, and even hatred of the other is what will make them *somebody*. As Peter Wehner said in an Op Ed on Christmas day, “...humans beings have worth because we are valued by God, who took on flesh, entered our world, shared our experiences—love, joy, compassion and intimate friendships; anger, sorrow, suffering and tears.” Because love came down at Christmas, the therefore of Christmas begins with who we know ourselves to be in him, our particular Christian identity, our vulnerable human lives redeemed and offered to God in the service of love.

The second “therefore” of Christmas in Luke’s story initially seems to contradict the particularity of religious identity. Luke insists, from the beginning of his Gospel to the end of the Book of Acts, that the synagogue and the church were part of one, continuous story; that Gentiles (the nations, the world, all who are not Jews) and Jews have been destined by love for love. As Jesus’ life begins in the temple, so the life of the church begins in the temple. The texts that continuously reminded Israel of her identity and particular role in God’s redemption *of the whole world* came to be heard as God’s word calling the church into being. More than any other writer in the New Testament, according to preacher and teacher Fred Craddock, Luke sets Jesus thoroughly within the particular community God chose; but Luke also says, in the same breath, that Israel has been called to be a light to the nations. That is, God chose the Jews and sent Jesus to be born from the house and lineage of David not for the sake of one people or one religion, including Christianity, but for the sake of the reconciliation of all people to one another and to the one God.

This seems to me to be a critical “therefore” of Christmas for Christians and Muslims and Jews two thousand years later. Most scholars believe that the writer of Luke-Acts was a Gentile, a man whose identity was completely changed because of the manger and the cross. In a word, Luke was *included* in the covenant of grace--through the love that came down at Christmas and was raised from the dead on the third day. His experience of faith was not the experience of one born into a tribe or a religion; it was the experience of one whose eyes were opened to a whole new way of being and seeing and doing through Jesus Christ. Far from thinking of his inclusion as exclusive to those who believed as he believed, he traced Jesus’ genealogy from Joseph through the prophets and the kings and the tribes of Israel and Abraham, but he does not stop there. He continues the genealogy all the way back to Adam, son of God. That is to say, the whole human running race has been and will be one in his love—not one in this religion or that. In fact, our identity as Christians insists that God’s intention, from beginning to end, is that we are one with every “other” God ever made. The “therefore” of Christmas both enlarges and gives definition to our hope: that the God who created us in love will finally gather all people into the love that

God is. The therefore for Christian, then, is this: as we have glimpsed that love in our flesh and in the fullness of time, so are we to bear witness to the unity of all peoples, our divisions being a scandal to the gospel of God's reconciling purposes.

Simeon and Anna underline both of Luke's "therefores." Anna, a widow for most of her life and a prophetess, is a member of the tribe of Asher, a devout Jew, who was looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When she sees the child, she praises God because she sees in Jesus the one who will save her people, her tribe. Anna rejoices in God's particular relationship to Israel made manifest in this child of devout parents.

Simeon lifts up the universal reach of God's promise made first to the Jews for the sake of the Gentiles. Like Anna, Simeon is an old man who has been waiting, as Israel has been waiting, to see the salvation God promised long ago in the coming of Messiah. He is led by the Spirit to appear in the temple just as Mary, Joseph and the infant arrive. The old man takes the child in his arms and sings words sung by the church ever since. What is striking about Simeon's song and emblematic of Luke's theological perspective is its declaration concerning the universal reach of God's saving grace. Echoing Second Isaiah, Simeon anticipates the story Luke will tell, a story of Paul's call to take the gospel into the whole world, that is, to the Gentiles, because "it is too light a thing that God's servant should raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel. I will give you," God says through Isaiah, "as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Because of the Word made flesh that dwelt among us, we are those who have received our identity, a whole new life that death cannot end, through this holy child. Yet it is an identity that sends us into the world as witnesses to a love that knows no end and that has no bounds: that reaches all the way back to Adam even as it awaits those who have yet to be born. If our witness to such love is the "therefore" of Christmas, what sort of witness to his light might pierce the deathly darkness of our human divisions today?

I happened on one such witness as I sat with my family on Christmas Eve, each of us furtively and not so furtively checking our email. Included in an email from the New York Times on "What We're Reading" was an article about the House of One, a combined mosque-synagogue-church that "is set to be built on the site of a 13th-century church [in Berlin]—one that was repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt until the Second World War." Instead of mounting an effort to build yet another sanctuary for Christians, the church gave the property back to the city so that one house might be raised as a living witness to the unity and the particularity of the three Abrahamic faiths (<http://magazine.good.is/articles/church-synagogue-mosque-house-of-one-berlin>).

According to its founding charter, the House of One is "dedicated to a culture predicated on four tenets: nonviolence and respect for all life, solidarity, respect and life lived with integrity, and equality. The design of the house is theologically more astute than its tenets. As Frithjof Timm, a representative of the House of One explains, "We have only one entrance in the building. So everyone who is going to pray—whether Jewish or Muslim or Christian—has to use this one entrance. The entrance leads to a common room, and from the common room there is a stair going up to the second floor and then you decide which way you go." I would add that when you leave, you return to the common room and leave, together, through the one exit, symbolizing God's intention for those gathered by God's address, from the beginning in Adam to the end when God will be all in all.

In the meantime, Simeon warns, the "therefore" of Christmas will be opposed. We did not need Simeon to tell us this on the last Sunday of the old Julian calendar. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel," Simeon tells Jesus' mother, "and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed...." No one knew such opposition better than another Berliner, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His words to seminarians in 1937 came to mind when I read of the House of One: "The Body of Christ takes up space on earth. That is the consequence," he says, [that is the "therefore"] "of the Incarnation....A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities. They are heard, learnt and apprehended, and that is all. But the incarnate Son of God needs not only ears or hearts, but living men [and women] who...[can] no longer remain in obscurity, for they [are] the light that must shine...."

What if the space to be taken up by the Incarnation of love in Northwest Philadelphia involved not a common building but a common witness? What if the "therefore" of Christmas for us involved joining with Germantown Jewish Community and the Masjidullah or the Masjid Mosque to sponsor a refugee family from Syria? What if the "therefore" of Christmas were not a disembodied truth or doctrine or religion but the love that came down at Christmas for the sake of all peoples? Thanks be to God!