

In their book, *What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write these words:

What would you think of a book that started with the opener, 'I am going to discuss Mahatma Gandhi as a Hindu saint, but I'll skip all that distracting stuff about British imperial India.'? Or another with, 'I am going to describe Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a Christian saint, but I'll get right to his biography and skip all that stuff about racism in America as background baggage'?

The questions are meant to be rhetorical ones and perhaps even a little bit sarcastic. But the point being made is a very serious one: you cannot understand the birth of Jesus detached from its first-century Roman imperial context. You cannot understand anything apart from context, including this birth. And yet one of the very real challenges on this holy night, as I look out at your smiling Christmassy faces, is that while I can pretty much assume that this is not the first time any of you have heard this story from the second chapter of Luke's Gospel, for the most part we have in fact heard just as Crossan and Borg suggest: disconnected from all that "distracting" stuff about imperial Rome. We've cut right to the story and skipped all that other stuff as "baggage." But in so doing, we are in danger of losing the real meaning of Christmas...

Jesus' birth took place "...in those days when a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered..." Whatever the historicity of that census may or may not have been, the point is that this is what dictators do: they issue edicts so that they keep an eye on people so they won't get out of line!

There are signs of Rome's imperial power everywhere in the Gospel accounts, if you know what you are looking for. Tonight we celebrate Jesus' birth but even tonight we gather at the foot of the cross: the Roman equivalent of the guillotine or the electric chair. One of the most misunderstood and misquoted of all the sayings of Jesus is the one about rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what belongs to God. If you read that pithy response *within context*, then you realize that Jesus is asking his followers to discern where their allegiance really does lie. Who is Lord of your life? How much of you belongs to Caesar and how much of you belongs to God? Jesus' comment is rhetorical (and perhaps even a little sarcastic) because it's so clear that the answer he is hoping for is most definitely not that Caesar gets everything during the week and God gets an hour or so if we have that left in us on Sunday mornings!

I have not yet lost track of our reason for gathering here on this holy night. And I am aware that a birthday party is not necessarily the time for a heady history lesson. Even so, a birthday party is a time for telling stories. I love those cards you get when you turn forty or fifty that remind you of what was happening in the year you were born and who was President and how much it cost for a gallon of gas or a new home. *Context matters*. It tells us something about who we are, and what shaped us if we lived through the Great Depression or were born the year John Kennedy was assassinated or if are old enough to remember the days before the internet. Context matters, in

our lives and in the life of the One whose birth we celebrate tonight. And to skip over those parts is to miss what matters.

What matters is that Jesus' wasn't born at the center of imperial power. He isn't born in Rome and sent to the best schools. He comes into this world as a vulnerable baby, born to a poor, teenage mother who (at least at the time of his birth) is living in a temporary homeless shelter. He will grow up to see the world from that angle. He's born in occupied Palestine where the political leader, Herod, (at least according to Matthew's telling of the story) is so frightened by his birth that he has countless children "disappeared" in an unsuccessful effort to destroy Jesus. His first visitors will be shepherds, who represent the lowest socio-economic strata of society. The scholars will argue about the historicity of these parts of the story but the point is that they are parts of the story nonetheless and they are true even if they didn't happen that way.

The theological point of the Incarnation is that God is with us—that God is no longer confined to the heavens or to our houses of worship, but has come into the world—into the streets. Everything about the particular circumstances of Jesus birth reminds us that, as Mother Theresa put it, you will see the face of Jesus most clearly among the poor and vulnerable. That is why, as our relationship of accompaniment with the people of El Salvador continues to deepen our faith. The twenty-one people who have now travelled there come back changed, and knowing they have seen Christ. So, too, in our ministries with the Mustard Seed and Dismas Farm or Heifer Project or shopping for a kid you don't even know in order to bring a smile to that child's face tomorrow morning.

Even though Jesus is born into a violent and occupied land, he refuses to perpetuate the cycle of violence. His Kingdom is not of this world; but that doesn't mean that it is only spiritual, or something that we see only after we die. It means that he refuses to lead a violent coup that then becomes what it hates, only to require another violent coup and then another. He comes among us as Prince of Peace, and calls upon us to be peacemakers so that the Kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven.

On the third week of Advent, Hathy and I went into Memorial Church, on the campus of Harvard University for the 102nd Service of Lessons and Carols to hear one of our two favorite tenors singing with the choir. One of the most moving parts of that service for me comes near the end when the entire congregation sings *Silent Night*, as we will do here tonight. There you have a choice to sing it in either English or German. The bulletin reminds the assembly of what took place along the Western Front during the First World War, when on Christmas Eve 1914: German and British soldiers came out of the trenches and ventured into "No-Man's Land" and there they mingled, exchanged food and gifts, played some soccer, and sang "Silent Night."

That story gives me chills nearly 100 years after it happened. It wasn't sanctioned by the powers-that-be. The generals didn't order it. It happened because ordinary soldiers—boys really—were able to glimpse how this dear Savior's birth changes the world, and how that birth invited change

in them. In the midst of war they imagined peace. Can you imagine anything riskier than a soldier putting down his weapon and walking out toward the enemy's front line to play soccer and sing "Silent Night?" I wonder what it was like twenty or thirty or forty years later when those men told the story to their children and grandchildren, cultivating within them the dream of a day when war would be studied no more, when the weapons would be laid down forever and replaced with soccer balls and music.

I love *Silent Night*. All the carols we sing tonight are pretty good, and I'm so glad that that the choir is singing "The Hallelujah Chorus." But for me, I always know that it is really Christmas when we dim the lights and let that light of Christ shine—because in that moment I feel that Christ is born again and that anything is possible.

Do you remember that version of Simon and Garfunkel singing "7 O'Clock News/Silent Night"—it's the final track on *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme*. The actual news for August 3, 1966 is being read by a broadcaster and includes a report on the "Civil Rights Bill," which is dismissed at the time as having no chance of being passed. The reporter goes on to speak about the death of Lenny Bruce from an overdose of narcotics, and Dr. King's plan to occupy Cicero, Illinois, and the National Guard being called in; and anti-Vietnam War protests and a speech by former Vice President Richard Nixon to the American Legion urging an increase in the war efforts in Vietnam and calling opposition to the war the "single greatest weapon working against the United States." And all the while, even as the news seems to get louder and louder, Simon and Garfunkel keep on singing: "Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright."

Are they being sarcastic? Ironic? Hopeful? I suppose the answer to that question may be in the ears of the hearer. But to my ears, it is simply the way this song must always be sung, whether it is in the little town of Bethlehem in occupied first-century Palestine or on the western front in 1914 during the Great War or into the daily news in the United States in 1966. Or into this world of ours where the news of our own day gets louder and louder: presidential politics, Congressional posturing, unemployment, foreclosures, the war in Afghanistan, tensions with Iran and Russia and North Korea, Occupy Wall Street.

And yet Peter will pick up the guitar and we will pause tonight once more to sing. *Silent Night, Holy Night* and we will hold our candles and pray for peace in our hearts, and peace in the neighborhood, and peace on earth. We cannot drown out the news of our day—it is real. We cannot and should not sing ourselves into denial. But we can and must sing, because Christmas happens into the mess of it all: into the mess of this world and into the mess of our lives. We can and must sing because Jesus doesn't wait for everything to be calm and bright to be born; not the first time around and not ever.

His birth comes as sheer gift. But like all gifts it must be received with a glad and generous heart. This gift of our dear Savior's birth is an invitation to changed lives. It makes us all ministers of the gospel—whether or not we happen to wear a collar.

When we leave this place, I pray that we will do so knowing that every night can be a silent and holy night—a little calmer and a little brighter when we make room in our busy lives for Christ to be born.

Peace on earth begins only when we let the peace that passes understanding dwell within us and we willingly embrace Christ's calling to be peacemakers. Whether or not the world around us is calm and bright, we make it a little calmer, and a little brighter, when we begin to sing, and then let that song move through us and into this time and place, always with God's help.

Merry Christmas!