

How the Christmas Story Teaches Us to Resist Autocracy

Rev. Rachael Weasley

12/2/24

Yesterday was the first Sunday of Advent, the four Sundays leading up to Christmas in the Christian calendar. Today is our last regular worship service until January, so tonight is our chance to explore the queer theology of Christmas together as Community of Hope. This Friday on Zoom, you're invited to Blue Christmas, a quiet service of candle lighting to make space for the grief, anger, and hard memories some of us experience during the holidays. Our only other event in December is our in-person Christmas party, instead of Wild Church, on the third Saturday of the month.

Last year I found myself reflecting on how much I love some of the winter-focused, non-religious traditions of Christmas. They feel like instructions for how to survive winter: connect with your network, put out lights so people can make their way safely through the dark, and practice generosity in a season when sleeping outside is dangerous and foraging for food is difficult. The connections with the Biblical Christmas story seem tenuous at best: gift-giving, parties, even the Christmas movie tropes of telling the truth or falling in love seem wholly unconnected to the narratives in Luke and Matthew about the birth of Jesus. I like them, though: the smell of evergreen trees and spicy cookies, the twinkly decorations, the encouragement to extend invitations and share warmth.

Just as these traditions draw us into cozy spaces, so they also create a vacuum in the space outside. Businesses are closed. People are traveling. For those of us who are lonely, or grieving, or broke, the traditions of the holidays can make things even harder. And the Biblical Christmas stories don't directly respond to these problematics, because performing happiness and consolidating wealth are not what the Christmas story is about.

I think in many ways, we are celebrating two holidays and calling them both Christmas.

So on the one hand, we have trees and decorations, gifts and parties and lights. And on the other hand, we have this set of Scripture texts about the birth of Jesus. I find that both of these versions of Christmas have the potential to exclude and harm, and the potential to help us dismantle oppression and give us heart.

Last year I remember feeling the challenge of exploring Christmas themes while our country was sending weapons to kill children in Palestine. Mennonite Action, Jewish Voices for Peace, and many other organizations in multiple countries have been active this past year in sending aid, calling for an arms embargo, getting arrested and staging vigils for peace. This year, weapons from our country have been part of the murders of 17,000 children. At least 700 were babies younger than 1. According to Jewish Voices for Peace, bodies are being found in mass graves still hooked up to IVs. This is genocide, and our government is helping it along.

So many of us have been trying to stop the flow of weapons being sent from the US to Israel, so that our own tax payments aren't funding the violence. The Joint Resolutions of Disapproval, or JRD, which Congress failed to pass last month, would have blocked weapons that the Biden administration approved last summer. According to the Quakers, these particular weapons *"have been used in strikes that have killed thousands of civilians, including aid workers and journalists, in Gaza over the last year."*

The JRD did not pass, and the vote wasn't even close. I think of Jesus, born in Bethlehem in Palestine under foreign rule by the Roman Empire.

Since our last Zoom worship, Trump was elected to a second term. Many families with trans members are getting their passports in order, and members of our own church are preparing to harbor immigrants in their homes if necessary. Trump specifically threatens women, people who are transgender, people of color, and the climate. He operates as an autocrat, undermining trust in democracy and demanding loyalty not to values or ideals but to him as a person. This month many of us have been feeling scared, and angry.

This historical moment in which we live: with the threat of an autocrat in power, with children dying by violence in modern-day Bethlehem, with huge wealth disparity in this country and a government behaving like an empire: the Biblical stories of Jesus' birth are no stranger to these problems. This is a context that the stories of Jesus' birth have a lot to say about.

I've been spending a lot of time reflecting on Daniel Hunter's article on the website Waging Nonviolence. The title and subtitle are:

10 ways to be prepared and grounded now that Trump has won
The key to taking effective action in a Trump world is to avoid perpetuating the autocrat's goals of fear, isolation, exhaustion and disorientation.

He outlines the 10 ways to be prepared. It's easy to read and I hope you do, it's on our church's facebook page. I won't summarize the whole thing, but I do want to make some connections between his tips on resisting autocracy and the actions of people in the Biblical Christmas stories. I hope that they help you feel connected to yourself, to your fellow activists and peacemakers, to God, and to our Christian heritage, as we enter this Christmas season.

Daniel Hunter's article begins by talking about trust, since autocracy benefits from us losing trust in ourselves and one another.

He writes: *Trust-building starts with your own self. It includes trusting your own eyes and gut, ...This also means being trustworthy — not just with information, but with emotions. That way you can acknowledge what you know and admit the parts that are uncertain fears nagging at you.*

The Christmas story is full of this theme of trust, but I want to focus on Mary visiting Elizabeth. She receives incredible news from an angel that she will bear God a child, and her response is to trust the angel, trust God, and then visit a friend to share her experience. In our time of political upheaval, she sets an important example to us. In the coming four years, we will need to connect with our Elizabeths: people we can trust and lean on. Daniel Hunter writes: *“Get some people to regularly touch base with. Use that trust to explore your own thinking and support each other to stay sharp and grounded.*

For the last several months I’ve been hosting a regular group at my house to “explore what is up with these times.” Our crew thinks differently but invests in trust. We emote, cry, sing, laugh, sit in stillness and think together.

I’ve written an agenda for such gatherings right after a Trump win that you can use.

All of us will benefit from actively organized nodes to help stabilize us. In a destabilized society, you need people who help ground you.”

So, maybe it’s time for our church to form some small groups.

Daniel Hunter moves on from trusting self and trusting others to grieving. *“After Donald Trump won in 2016, we all saw colleagues who never grieved. They didn’t look into their feelings and the future — and as a result they remained in shock. For years they kept saying, “I can’t believe he’s doing that...”*

So, come to Blue Christmas. Come to worship. Read the book of Lamentations. Sing, cry. Come to terms with what’s happening because your feelings are important, but also because it will help us move into action.

Next he identifies some resistance pathways for the coming four years. There will be too much happening for us to respond to all of it, so we will need to discern our call and diversify our efforts. What’s ours to do and what will we have to let go of, even though we care about it? I want to show two examples of resistance pathways he identifies: Protecting people, and protecting civic institutions.

I’ll quote him again here for a minute: “One pathway is called “Protecting People.” These are folks surviving and protecting our own — especially those of us directly targeted, such as trans people, folks choosing abortions and immigrants. This might mean organizing outside current systems for health care and mutual aid, or moving resources to communities that are getting targeted. Further examples include starting immigrant welcoming committees, abortion-support funds or training volunteers on safety skills to respond to white nationalist violence.”

In our Biblical narrative, we see Jesus’ family fleeing to Egypt when Herod threatens to kill all the children under 2. They hide in Egypt for a few years, until it is safe to return to the country,

and that is how Jesus survives to adulthood. We also see the magi refusing to tell Herod where to find Jesus.

Resistance pathway #2 is “Defending Civic Institutions.” Hunter explains that: *“Insider groups will play a central battle against Trump fascism. You may recall government scientists dumping copious climate data onto external servers, bracing for Trump’s orders. This time, many more insiders understand it’s code red. Hopefully, many will bravely refuse to quit — and instead choose to stay inside as long as possible.”*

I see the Magi operating this way when, instead of openly defying Herod, they simply return home by another way. They protect the information about where Jesus can be found, but retain diplomatic relations with the ruler in charge of that area. As we analyse our own power and discern how God is calling us to navigate these coming years, there may be times when we serve the cause of justice and protect our people by staying on the inside of an institution. Those of us outside those institutions can send encouragement to those who are trying to resist from the inside.

I’ll end with the last of the ten things, which is envisioning a positive future. I am amazed with the song Mary busts out with after her angel visit. Why is it about reversals of power? Where did she come up with this stuff? And how bold of her to frame it as things that have already happened, when she and we lived and live in a world where there are still tyrants and hungry people. In order to work for peace, we have to imagine a world at peace. I’ll end with Mary’s words, in the form of these much-sung hymn lyrics.

From the halls of power to the fortress tower
Not a stone will be left on stone
Let the king beware for your
Justice tears ev’ry tyrant from his throne
The hungry poor shall weep no more
For the food they can never earn
There are tables spread, ev’ry
Mouth be fed
For the world is about to turn

May it be so. Amen