

Meditation for Advent 3, 12/17/23
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They were singing and they were shouting and they were doing it at the same time and so nobody knew, for sure, what was going on.

That, more or less, is the summary of the situation in Jerusalem when the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon to start rebuilding the people of God, as Anne Marie read for us in our lesson. Or some of them did, anyway. Others remained in Babylon, having been born there, raised there, married there, and raised their children there. Close to seventy years had passed since Jerusalem had been sacked and the temple destroyed by the Babylonians and King Jeconiah and the top layer of Judahite society had been frog-marched into captivity in what is present-day Iraq.

And in the Ezra reading a different generation was returning from exile to meet another different generation whose grandparents had been left behind to work the land on behalf of their overlords. When the old people saw what the younger people were trying to do – lay the foundations of a new city and a new temple – they wept at the memory of what had been before. The folks in charge were jazzed by their accomplishment – Look what we’re doing! A new Jerusalem! A new temple! – and they were proud of their modest accomplishment, perhaps too proud. A trophy for showing up. A blue ribbon for having a pulse.

But at least they were trying, and none of them could foresee that their modest efforts to rebuild not just a city or a temple but rather a God-defined culture – those efforts would eventually lead to the establishing of two new religions – Judaism and Christianity – and the creation of the world that you and I live in today.

But none of those folks who were singing and shouting and celebrating and mourning could see that. They could only know the hot mess in which they found themselves and in which they felt they were doing their best. Everyone recognized that they’d been given the chance for a restart, but opinions differed not just strongly but violently over which direction that restart should take. And so there was both singing and shouting.

As there is today. There is singing in Bethlehem, as Christmas approaches, and there is shouting in Gaza as the killing continues. There is singing in the carol services on our college campuses and there is shouting across police barricades on those same campuses as some call for the genocide of Israel while others denounce the slow genocide of the Palestinian people.

So this is Christmas, as John Lennon and the children sang to us back in 1971, and “war is over, if you want it.” Do we want war to be over? Some of us do, certainly, but some of us don’t, because violence, in those eyes, is the only way to redress sustained and grievous wrongs. One person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter. One person’s hero is another person’s despot. One person’s patriot is another person’s insurrectionist.

And so on and so forth, ad infinitum, in saecula saeculorum. As long as there are people, there will be violence – and poverty and suffering and oppression and power-hungry, ego-driven charismatic figures who will convince masses of ordinary people to collude in their abominations. Such figures rarely start out that way, but the

Bible's stubborn insistence on the pervasiveness and intractability of human sin, as well as Lord Acton's observation about the corrupting power of power make it pretty obvious to me at least that this is the way Christmas will always be: some singing and some shouting.

Our job is the singing, as our musicians have reminded us on this third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of joy. With John Lennon and other composers of protest songs, we don't pretend that Christmas ends the violence, the conflict, and the silent, subtle, insidious arrangements that make conflict inevitable. Christmas doesn't erase the suffering, Christmas happens because of the suffering. The singing happens because of the suffering. The story happened – and happens in its being repeated year after year – because of the suffering that happens year after year.

The Christmas event is our faith's answer to the shouting of a world that does not know the things that make for peace. Christmas, with its singing and praying and candle-lighting and gift-giving and spirit-lifting is our faith's stubborn push-back against the darkness and the violence. Christmas is our faith's full-throated proclamation of the gospel of the One who said, "So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice and no one will take your joy from you" (Jn 16:22).

We can always be drowned out, of course, temporarily; even a small bomb makes a bigger noise than a Christmas carol. And we can be undermined and compromised, as we often have been, by succumbing to the temptation to fight on the world's terms rather than on Christ's terms. And when we do that, we join our voices to the shouting rather than to the singing.

But some of us will persist in a different fight, a different struggle, and a different calling. We'll resist the temptation to say that violence is our only option. We'll struggle against the voices that shout you're either with us or you're with our enemies. We'll push against the narcotizing, smothering cult of consumption that renders us insensible to the sweatshops, the cartels, the corruption, the environmental devastation, and the concentrations of wealth and power.

We'll sing our carols and our hymns and, sometimes, our protest songs, offering the world a vision of a better way. And we will judge our success not by the degree of our influence but rather by the integrity of our faithfulness. For in that faithfulness lies our joy. "I have said these things to you," the Christ of Christmas said, "so that my joy may be in you, and so that your joy may be complete" (Jn 15:11).

Many years ago, I heard a preacher say that if you're a democracy and you believe in democracy you'll be a democracy until you're the last one. If we are followers of the Prince of Peace and we believe in the Prince of Peace, we will be that leader's followers – THAT leader's followers – till we're the last ones. We will, stubbornly and non-violently and counter-culturally keep putting Christ back into Christmas – not back in the manger – the sentimental tableau of adoring shepherds and cooing child – but rather the Christ of Matthew 25, the Human and Divine One of self-sacrificing, redemptive, and, we believe, ultimately triumphant love.

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