

# **“Beginning the Jesus Story”**

## **by Pat Conover**

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### **The Second Sunday of Advent**

The first part of this sermon is about Christmas and the second part is about beginning the story of Jesus.

This is a bookend sermon to my sermon in which I spoke about how Easter screws up the story about what is most spiritually important concerning the death of Jesus. Taken together, Christmas and Easter, as the biggest events of the Christian year, completely skip Jesus as a grown adult who embodied, led, taught, and healed. It was grown up Jesus who gathered close followers, who pointed to the salvation importance of recognizing the Holy Spirit in our lives and relationships.

All four gospels present the history of Jesus as hagiography. A hagiography portrays an idolized story as heroic or saintly. Augustus Caesar ruled for 23 years before Jesus was born and during his childhood. A hagiographer wrote about the birth of Augustus as a miraculous act that made Augustus the child of Zeus and therefore a God to be worshiped and not merely obeyed. It's the same thing Matthew and Luke did to Jesus, leaving us with two conflicting miraculous stories linking Jesus to the royal lineage of David. Their vision was to present Jesus as the miraculous Christ who would soon return with an army of angels to take revenge on their oppressors and restore the special promises supposedly made to the people of Israel.

The gospels make Jesus into something more like God than a human being. This was a common claim in the time of Jesus, as witnessed by the claim of Caesar and the Sons of God named in Hebrew Scripture. Stories of Roman Gods in human form doing wild and wacky things were common. The mystery cults in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus all had figures similar to the gospel figure of Jesus. One way to think about the Christmas stories is that they were part of

the transition of Christianity from Jewish to Roman culture.

Mark portrayed Jesus as an adult with special powers. That is also how Augustus Caesar portrayed himself. He authored a brass plaque that pointed to his great deeds as an adult. Augustus named himself as Savior of the world because he brought about the Pax Romana and accomplished many things that improved the day to day lives of people. Among many things, he continued a special deal with the Jews that gave them significant day-to-day control of their lives under Jewish law.

The Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke are quite different from each other but both revolve around Jesus as special, as the Messiah who would come again with the Heavenly Hosts of Destruction to restore the Kingdom of David with Jesus ruling as Chief Judge and his twelve disciples as judges of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Christmas and Easter stories that make Jesus somehow more than human direct attention away from Jesus as Savior, Jesus as what the Presence of God looks like in human beings. If Jesus was special then we, who are not special, cannot be expected to do the kinds of things Jesus did. We can just worship Jesus instead of following him. We can slide into the cheap grace of atonement theology in which God sacrifices himself to appease himself. When we think Jesus magically took away the punishment for our sins, it is easier to slide by our guilts and need for forgiveness.

Christmas gets one thing right. Jesus was born as a baby. Christmas is a time that we can be thankful that Jesus and Mary survived childbirth and Jesus survived childhood, that he began his path of spiritual formation and transformation. Jesus didn't just drop down from heaven with the mind of God fully formed and plopped onto Earth from between Mary's legs.

I am thankful for the birth of Jesus in 4 BCE. into a marginalized low-income working class family probably in Galilee. We know enough now about what was going on in Roman dominated Palestine to have a few landmarks for considering the spiritual formation of Jesus.

Which brings me to the second half of my sermon.

Mark and the other gospel writers in the Christian Testament wrote in Greek

for a church well on its way to becoming a Gentile Church. They were shedding Jewish cultural restrictions which had become Jewish law and holding up Jesus as the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah. Claiming the supposed special promises of God to Abraham, Moses, and David as belonging to Christians rather than the millennia long hope of traditional Jews, was a prominent source of enmity in synagogue Judaism four decades after the death of Jesus. They asserted the repeated theme of the priests and prophets who had argued over and over again that God was punishing Jews for their infidelity. They pointed to the genocide of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple as a sign of God's abandonment because the Temple Leaders had not followed Jesus, who was sent to them by God, and had instead initiated the process that led to the crucifixion of Jesus. It is hardly surprising that many synagogues were no longer willing to share their building with Christian Jews, that some Jews, like Paul, were actively persecuting Christian Jews.

The author of First Isaiah wrote about 750 years before the time of Jesus in a time when the ten Northern tribes of Israel had separated from the two Southern tribes. His message was a challenge to the kings and priests who controlled the army and the temple in Jerusalem. He predicted the destruction of Solomon's temple and the defeat of Judah in battle as a coming punishment for their bad behavior.

Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) was written two hundred years later, about 550 year before Jesus. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had finished off Judah in battle, destroyed the temple, and taken prisoners back to Babylon in two waves of exiles. Sixty-seven years later, Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonians, freed the Jews and similar tribes, and allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and Judah. God was presented as punishing with Nebuchadnezzar and ending the punishment with Cyrus of Persia. The God of the Jews does not act only through Jews.

Second Isaiah writes for a time of freedom in the midst of very hard times. The returning exiles had kept their religion and culture alive in captivity. The exiles returned without their wealth of herds and weapons, to Jerusalem and the devastated towns of Judah. Other tribes had moved in to claim what was of value and built their own villages. They returned to a larger setting of dispersed and defeated Jewish tribes, such as Samaria and Galilee, which had not gone into exile.

When we hear the language of “make straight a highway in the desert” we should think of the difficulties of the long journey back from Babylon with few resources in wilderness country; a return to the hostile responses of other tribes who claimed the land as their own. It was a time of small war, up close and personal hand-to-hand war. The old enmities between Jews and their neighbors were rekindled and resolved with sword, spear, and bow.

Second Isaiah boldly claims that the covenant of God with David, and by inference with Moses and Abraham, had been restored to the people. The author’s vision of salvation was that the people would be led to holiness by priests and prophets by ritual observance and ethical behavior, not by a military king. As yet there was no organized army run by a king, just exiles trying to reclaim their ancestral homes.

In verse nine, we get a rekindling of Zionism, the restoration of Jerusalem as a mountain fortress.

*Climb to a mountain top, you that bring good news to Zion; raise your voice and shout aloud, you that carry good news to Jerusalem ...say to the cities of Judah, “Your God is here.”*

At his point we could conclude that we have more of the same old, same old: Yahweh giving victory in battle as proof that the special promise of God to the Jews had been restored, a justification for ethnic cleansing in the name of being a special people. This theme continues in verse ten.

*Here is the Lord God; he is coming in might, coming to rule with a powerful arm. His reward is with him, his recompense before him.*

The enduring problem of Zionism, echoed via Christianity in the claims of specialness by the United States, is justification for bad behavior against enemies, justification for colonialism and slavery, justification for wars of aggression and expansion such as the war in Iraq.

But then we get the great gift of Second Isaiah: a gift of vision about what is to be hoped for in the leader of restored Judaism in Jerusalem. Verse eleven.

*Like a shepherd he will tend his flock and with his arm keep them together;*

*he will carry the lambs in his arms and lead the ewes to water.*

This is Twenty-third Psalm vision. This is the beloved community imaged in terms of caring for children and women.

Second Isaiah does not stand alone in Hebrew Scripture with his vision of beloved community. I've mentioned the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Here I quote verses 5 and 10 from Psalm 85, our lectionary Psalm

*Will you be angry with us forever? Must your wrath last for all generations?*

*Love and faithfulness have come together; justice and peace have embraced.*

The enduring good news in Second Isaiah is the vision for beloved community which can exist and increase in the midst of exile, in the midst of military and political weakness.

550 years later, we have Jesus who studied and revered the Spiritual guidance of Hebrew Scripture. He taught his close followers about a beloved community that is already present and needs no special promises, no Messiah, no Second Coming. Jesus lived and died for his vision of beloved community that could live and grow within the Roman Empire, just as it had lived and grown within the Babylonian captivity.

We can join Jesus in our expression of Beloved Community and lift it up as vision for our citizenship responsibilities and callings to contribute to a transformed United States, a United States which loves and cares for the lambs and the ewes rather than for contentious goats that boss and push and punish in competition for personal, family, and tribal advantages.

Jesus was born as a child of one of the Northern tribes of Israel, who had been free from the dominance of Temple Judaism for about 850 years. His spiritual formation began in the context of Synagogue Judaism, a religion centered around rabbis and the guidance of Torah, the inspiration of other books that were valued in Jewish tradition.

In a synagogue Jesus became literate in Hebrew, and in the Aramaic dialect of Hebrew. Assuming his interest in scriptural studies, it would be likely that Jesus went on to study in one of the two great rabbinic schools in Jerusalem,

or perhaps with a single rabbi elsewhere who had studied in one of the two great schools.

Jesus taught like a Hillel rabbi as exemplified by the story of the Samaritan who helped a Jew, a story in which Temple leaders were treated as indifferent to the suffering of those in need. It was a story that responded to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" The answer of Jesus was love your neighbors and serve them with ministry. This is a story of salvation as the expansion of the beloved community. This is a story of salvation within the Roman Empire, within Judaism, before everything had been made right.

Mark offers no Christmas story and instead begins by presenting the opening verses of Second Isaiah as a prophecy referenced to John the Baptist. Mark and the other gospel writers are intent on making Jesus greater than John. This leads not only to misusing Second Isaiah and other Hebrew Scripture but also to submerging John's role as a mentor to Jesus. Jesus followed John in preaching the free forgiveness of God without the control of Temple Judaism. Jesus went to John to confess his sins and experience forgiveness. Like Jesus, if we want to be forgiven we need to recognize and confess our need for forgiveness, claim our hope as guidance for living in greater harmony with ourselves and each other, our recognition of living into callings and ministries as an expression of our love for God and for each other.

When Jesus was baptized by John, or perhaps when he heard John preach, he had an ecstatic experience of the Holy Spirit. While John the Baptist used the Jewish mikvah purity bath as a symbol of baptism, the baptism of Jesus was remembered as fiery. Jesus guided his followers to experience the Holy Spirit for themselves so that they could do works even greater than those Jesus did. After the death of Jesus, his close followers had the guidance of Jesus and the empowerment of their own ecstatic experiences. In Acts, the beginning of the church story at Pentecost is presented as such a fiery ecstatic experience.

As Muriel said last Sunday, intellect without feeling and heart isn't good enough. Jesus learned about feeling and heart from John: a wild man in the wilderness who offered mikvah baths of purification as a sign of the free forgiveness of God. John's Judaism didn't need the Temple, specifically did not need to try to appease an angry God with animal sacrifices, or other food

gifts to temple authorities. Neither did the Judaism of Jesus. There is a wildness, an openness, a riskiness to claiming forgiveness, to recognizing and responding to God.

Recognizing how much God and our Beloved Community matters to me, make me feel happy and excited. If you share any of that excitement with me I could use an Amen about now. The more we can get happy together, the more empowered we will become for the harder challenges of our callings to ministry.

Christmas is a good time for celebrating the birth and spiritual formation of Jesus. Christmas is a good time for celebrating our own spiritual formation around what is life giving, what is coming to birth in our personal and shared stories and callings. We don't need any second coming of Jesus. If we can recognize and embrace his teaching, if we can appreciate the inspiration in the life Jesus lived, we have enough to live our lives with excitement. We can take up our callings with courage and hope.

AMEN