“Hope is Born” by Elizabeth Gelfeld

January 7, 2018

First Sunday after the Epiphany

What a fantastic story! A baby has been born in Bethlehem. Then some wise men from the East arrive in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising.” Herod, who *is* king of the Jews, feels threatened and asks his advisors where the prophets say the Messiah will be born. They tell him, in Bethlehem. Herod calls for the wise men, in secret, and, after questioning them as to the exact time of the star’s appearance, tells them to go to Bethlehem and bring back word of the child’s whereabouts. They leave Jerusalem, and now that star, which they had seen rising, is right there, moving ahead of them, then stopping over a house. The wise men, overcome with joy, enter the house and kneel down before the child. Then they offer him valuable gifts from their treasure chests.

As I began to prepare this sermon, I reread several previous Seekers sermons, which is fun to do even if you’re not

planning to preach. Several years ago, Pat gave a sermon sorting out the Christmas stories, and explained that what we often regard as one story – set in a stable in Bethlehem, with Mary and Joseph and angels and shepherds with their sheep and three kings with their camels – is really two stories, one in Matthew and the other in Luke, and they don't have very much in common. In Luke's story there's an angel announcing two miraculous pregnancies – first, to Zechariah, whose wife, Elizabeth, though she is far too old, will bear the child who will become John the Baptist; and the second announcement is to Elizabeth's cousin Mary. Luke also tells of the manger, because there's no room in the inn, and the shepherds out in the field, and about Mary and Joseph bringing the baby to the Temple, where he is received with joy by the old man Simeon and the prophet Anna. Luke's story also gives us some of the most beautiful prayers in the Christian tradition, such as the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise – prayers that have been set to music throughout the centuries and still are prayed daily by Christians worldwide.

Matthew's much shorter story has none of the above. Its highlight is the visitors from the East, variously translated as wise men, astrologers, or kings. After they find the baby Jesus and pay him homage, the story darkens. An angel warns Joseph in a dream that Herod is coming, so in the middle of the night Joseph flees with Mary and the baby to Egypt. Herod does indeed order the killing of all the baby boys in Bethlehem, a part of the Christmas story that's not often included in Sunday School pageants.

In his sermon, Pat spoke of the Christmas stories as midrash, which is a type of Jewish storytelling that seeks to provide a "back story" for a biblical personality, or to explain the motivations of God and of people. Midrashic stories take roughly sketched biblical characters and flesh them out with details that help us identify with them. Some of the most famous midrashim are stories about Abraham and Sarah that are

so much a part of Jewish tradition that many people don't realize they can't be found in the Torah.

We Christians do that, too. For example, the wise men of Matthew's story don't have camels. There are camels in our reading today from Isaiah – "the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense … ." In the book of I Kings, when the Queen of Sheba visits King Solomon, she brings camels bearing spices, gold, and precious stones. But there are no camels in Matthew.

The week before Christmas, some friends invited my husband and me to see the new Star Wars movie, *The Last Jedi.* I was excited, but I knew I had missed several of the previous movies, so I asked my son how I should prepare for this new one. He told me that I only needed to see the last one, *The Force Awakens*. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, read Brenda's sermon from Epiphany Sunday two years ago, when *The Force Awakens* had just opened. You see, there is precedent for talking about Star Wars in Seekers sermons. On the other hand, if you're a Star Wars fan, I understand that you might disagree with my impressions, and that's okay.

A brief review: Stars Wars is an epic story that takes place "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away." Many species of aliens, some of them human-ish, live together in communities. People have robotic droids to help with daily tasks; and traveling between planets is routine. There is a spiritual and mystical element called "the Force," and people who are born deeply connected to the Force are able, with training, to perform various supernatural feats – for either good or evil. Two groups battle it out: on the Light side of the Force there are the Jedi, represented by Princess Leia and her twin brother, Luke Skywalker; on the Dark side, the Sith are directed by an evil emperor and his mysterious agent, Darth Vader. A retired Jedi Knight, Obi-Wan Kenobi, lives in exile on the desert planet Tatooine, where the orphan Luke is raised

by his step-uncle and aunt.

The Light and Dark sides of the Force are intertwined and fluid: the murderous Darth Vader turns out to be Luke and Leia's father, Anakin Skywalker, a former Jedi apprentice of Obi-Wan. And then there's the character Han Solo, a reluctant good guy, a nonbeliever in the Force, a charming, cynical, scoundrel pirate who yells a lot – one critic called him the character we all can most relate to.

I was 22 when the first Star Wars film came out, in 1977. The main characters, and the actors who played them, were about my age. They still are. When we were young – and some of you were still stardust – our culture, which Star Wars reflected, still saw a fairly clear line between good and evil, and hope was strong that the younger generation could purify and renew the establishment. The second Star Wars trilogy, in the 1990s, had evil corporations secretly conspiring with a corrupt government to foster endless war. It's beginning to sound more like real life, isn't it?

In *The Force Awakens* – the movie from two years ago – Leia is now the general leading a ragtag remnant of the Resistance against the evil empire. The deadly imperial agent Kylo Ren, like Darth Vader before him, is a privileged young man who went bad. And, he is the son of Leia and Han Solo, and was Luke Skywalker's Jedi apprentice. As a parent of grown children, I grieved for and with Leia and Han. What parent does not know the pain of losing a child to the Dark side? If it's not your own child, it's your neighbor's. Luke, who in his youth saved the galaxy, now believes the Jedi are finished, and he lives in self-imposed exile on an island planet that looks a lot like an ancient Irish monastery. Meanwhile, the new hero is a young woman named Rey, not a princess, not born to any royalty or privilege, who comes from nowhere, yet is gifted at wielding the Force.

As I watched both *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* within a

week, I was on the edge of my seat, completely caught up emotionally. I anxiously cheered for Rey and the other Resistance fighters, whom one critic described as “hounded and broken people who are afraid hope will be snuffed out.”

I cried when a beloved character from the old movies made a surprise appearance.

I said to myself, “Look at you. What’s up with this?”

And a thought came to me, about the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke: might they be sort of a first-century Star Wars? Could they be examples of how the early Christians used the technology and imaginative resources of their time and place to keep hope alive in the aftermath of destruction and terror, and in the midst of social and religious upheaval?

Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels both were written around the years 85 to 90 CE – two to three generations after the death of Jesus, but before Judaism and Christianity finally separated. The first followers of Jesus were simply one more Jewish sect among many.

When the Roman empire destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE, the Judaism that was centered on Temple worship died. The Pharisees, who were the rabbis, began to create what would become modern Judaism, organized in synagogues and centered on prayer and the study of sacred scripture.

So, both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity were expressions of a new order, and much of our Christian scripture is about how the two struggled and, finally, parted company. Matthew’s community especially struggled to hold on to their Jewish identity. Matthew’s story of the birth of Jesus firmly aligns Jesus with the Jewish messianic prophecies. Already at his birth, the Gentiles – wise men from the East – read in the stars that a new king of the Jews is born. Matthew also shows how Jesus is a new Moses, and casts the Jewish king Herod in the role of pharaoh, ordering the murder of all the male

children of Bethlehem.

For Matthew, the Jesus movement is the new order, but a *Jewish* new order. And that is why Matthew is the most anti-Jewish of the four gospels. In Matthew, Jesus continually challenges and opposes the Pharisees, calling them blind guides, blind fools, and hypocrites. It is in Matthew that Jewish crowds urge Pontius Pilate to crucify Jesus, shouting, "His blood be on us and on our children!" – a cry that has echoed horribly through centuries of Christian persecution of Jews.

In a book titled *The Reluctant Parting*, Julie Galambush, an associate professor of religious studies at the College of William and Mary, says that "Matthew's harangues against 'the Jews' express his community's pain over the widening separation threatening an unwanted divorce between them and the rest of the Jewish world."

Matthew's community will lose the struggle, yet remain part of the new order, whose future belongs mainly to the Gentiles. As Luke Skywalker says in *The Last Jedi*, "This is not going to go the way you think."

What lessons can we take from all this, today, and what questions are raised?

Do we hunker down and wait for an opportunity to purify the old order – for example, the presidency, or the Congress – or has the time come to turn our attention and energy to something new?

And what about our church? From the 1940s on, the Church of the Saviour, and later Seekers Church, have repeatedly forged a new order of living as part of the Body of Christ. Can we continue to let go of the old ways and embrace the unknown?

In a sermon during the Epiphany season of 2014, Kevin asked us,

Are we a community that inspires and fosters wonder and awe, contentment and love, and creativity? Are we a place [where] people feel loved and honored, no matter who they are, or where they come from? Are we a safe place that offers an experience to engage, maybe even wrestle with, our frustrating and frightening unknowns? Are we a place that keeps the edges hot by encouraging people to be a little edgy and daring and really damn curious? Or, do we encourage compliance and tolerance to traditional rules? And, will this calling-out experience last? Are we a place that will be around 25 years from now?

I will close with one verse from our reading today from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, in the translation called *The Message,* by Eugene Peterson:

The mystery is that people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of him all their lives … stand on the same ground before God. They get the same offer, same help, same promises in Christ Jesus. The Message is accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board.

Amen. May it be so.