

# Peace and Empire

Isaiah 11.1-9

Second Sunday of Advent

December 5, 2010

This is no time for a child to be born,  
With the earth betrayed by war & hate  
And a comet slashing the sky to warn  
That time runs out & the sun burns late.

That was not time for a child to be born,  
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;  
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn –  
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?  
The inn is full on planet earth,  
And by a comet the sky is torn –  
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

- The Risk of Birth, by Madeleine L'Engle

## *Reading*

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 9 They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

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Some five hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah had a vision of God's dream of peace; the peace that would be ushered in with God's reign. I love the passage in chapter 11 in which Isaiah shares his vision, the peaceable kingdom we have come to call it. That kingdom began to unfold in the events surrounding the birth of Jesus as narrated in Matthew and Luke. I'm sure you love these birth stories as much as I; and knowing this, I wonder what adjectives you would choose to describe them. Some might say awe-inspiring, others mysterious, others still majestic, or comforting, exciting, inspiring... there are any number of adjectives you might choose; but there is one adjective rarely if ever used to describe the stories of Jesus' birth; courageous.

It may never have occurred to you to think of these stories as courageous; but they are. Their courage can be seen in the fact that every title given to Jesus in the early Christian community and echoed in the birth stories - Son of God, Redeemer, Savior, Lord, King - was accorded by Rome to Caesar. Caesar was son of god, Caesar was redeemer and lord, and Caesar was, like Jesus, hailed as the prince of peace in inscriptions around the Roman Empire. Make no mistake, it was dangerous to fly in the face of Rome; it was dangerous to call Jesus the prince of peace when Caesar claimed that title. It was courageous of Matthew and Luke to defy Rome in their adoration of Jesus, to look into the teeth of empire and claim that peace comes only through the reign of God.

In these stories Jesus and Caesar collide one against the other, vying for the same titles. They differ most starkly, however, in the *means* they envision to bring about peace on earth. Rome's vision of peace was based on empire; that is to say on violence, conquest, raw power and the ability to oppress peoples into submission. One Scottish general poised for defeat at the hands of Rome expressed the matter in this way, "...to plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire: they make a desert and they call it peace." You and I might not see this as peace, but Rome saw itself as bringing peace on earth, the so-called Pax Romana.

The vision of peace in the gospels, on the other hand, is based on justice and compassion. That which Rome called peace might come through conquest, but the peace of which the angels sang - Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace - was not the peace of empire. It was the peace of justice seen first in the life of Jesus, in his teachings, and in his

passion and death. In stark contrast to the peace of empires, the peace of God's reign is a peace established by compassion, justice, and equality; a peace attained by looking into the eyes of all God's children and seeing them as blessed, as marked by God for fairness and justice.

The peace of which the angels sang, the peace of which Jesus is the prince, is not the peace of empire. Rather, it's the peace of compassion and justice. But this presents us with a problem. We have to choose between the two. We can stand for one and only one vision of peace. We can be advocates of empire or we can be advocates of God's reign. We can choose peace by conquest and oppression, or we can choose peace through justice. But this is not an abstract choice; we choose every day in a thousand and one seemingly insignificant decisions about how to treat others we encounter. We choose anger or patience, spite or honesty, ridicule or compassion, exploitation or fairness. This choice is laid out clearly for us in the birth stories in Matthew and Luke, and a good part of our preparation for the central miracle of our faith - the birth of God's Christ - depends on our choice: empire or God's reign of justice.