

“Sharing Dominion” by Pat Conover

01/07/1995 by Pat Conover given in St. Louis, MO: Sharing Dominion

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Sermon by Pat Conover given in St. Louis, MO on January 7, 1995

Scripture: Magi Story in [Matthew 2:1-13](#)

This is the lectionary story for my home congregation and I have never preached from this text before. I was so turned off by arguments over the virgin birth in the churches of my youth that I came to generally dislike the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke. Then there was a period when I was interested in scraping away all the accretions of the gospel writers so I could try to understand what was really going on with this Jesus person. Now I'm prone to thinking that even if we can get some windows onto the words and actions of Jesus, that an important part of what was going on was that people were responding to Jesus the best they could, and their best included stories to name some truths they couldn't fully grasp. This is comforting to me, because I seem to be spending a lot of time with truths and powers that I can't fully grasp either.

John Crossan names the Christmas stories as overtures rather than first acts. That is, they were written to tip off the readers about the themes of a gospel. So let's look at some of the themes in the Matthew Christmas story.

- There is a long genealogy that places Jesus in a blood line, primarily through kings, going back to King David and then to Abraham. This suggests a context: Jesus is to be understood within the development of the Jews as a distinct people in a direct line to the foundational characters.
- Several of the incidents in the first two stories of Matthew are named by the author as proofs that Jesus fulfilled Hebrew scripture prophecies in several ways. Like the genealogy, this points to Matthew's interest in claiming Jesus as a fulfillment of Jewish hopes and expectations.
- The main story line was developed in parallel to the story of the birth of Moses as popularly told in that day. The story line has 3 acts. The first act is The Ruler's Plot with scenes of sign, fear, consultation, and massacre. The second act is the Father's Decision which has three scenes, and the third act is the child's deliverance with the ironic twist that Jesus escapes to Egypt. The care with which the story was constructed in parallel to the popular story of the birth of Moses helps us to understand that Matthew is writing this story to make a point and the comparison of Jesus to Moses suggests that Matthew saw Jesus as a figure of liberation of the people Israel.
- The connections to David and Moses have an unavoidable nationalistic flavor that links easily to the rebellions of the Maccabees and the Zealots of the time of Jesus. To make this point inescapable, Matthew has the astrologers brought kingly gifts to Jesus.

In telling a story to address Jewish hopes and expectations it is interesting that Matthew writes foreigners into the script to recognize Jesus as King. Since the Jewish leadership of temple and palace refused to recognize Jesus as king, the recognition comes from foreign dignitaries. Furthermore, the astrologers frighten Herod, the King of the Jews, along the

way. Herod then tries to kill Jesus. Thus is the crucifixion theme presented in the Matthew overture.

Is it hard for you to think of Jesus as a threat to the Jewish and Roman powers of the day? From one point of view, the sacerdotal power of the temple in Jerusalem and the army and empire of Rome would seem overwhelming to scattered resistance groups in Galilee. There may have been hero stories of the Maccabees to grow up on, but the Maccabees were brutally crushed. Facing such temporal power, the temple authorities quickly struck a deal. Both the High Priest and Herod bought their positions from Rome. The alliance was further cemented when Herod paid for a lot of the temple construction, and a magnificent temple it was.

But revolutionary fervor had not been crushed in the countryside. Zealots committed isolated acts of murder. After the death of Jesus widespread rebellion did indeed arise again and led to the genocide of Jerusalem.

John the Baptist was captured and then killed for his political commentary and Jesus was just as hard hitting. For example, in the story of the Samaritan who helped a wounded (Jew) on the road to Jericho, representatives of the temple pass by and a Samaritan helps. There is lots of liberating power in the Samaritan story, but one layer of interpretation is that there is an appeal to build community with Samaritans, a "tribe" out of favor with the temple and equally oppressed by Rome.

Is it hard for you to think of Jesus as being killed for political reasons? That isn't what I was taught when I was growing up either. Whatever the historic truth is that underlies this story, it seems significant to me that Matthew thought Jesus was political enough to get killed for it.

We don't know much about the political and possible

revolutionary side of Jesus because if there were disciples that followed that path they probably died a couple of decades later in the genocide of Jerusalem. Also, it probably wasn't too healthy to have explicitly political challenges written down in a period of deadly persecution. It was probably dangerous enough to have the gospel of Matthew in your possession.

I am not proposing that we think of Jesus as a military revolutionary. I am proposing that Jesus issues us a far more profound challenge, to resist oppression and support justice and compassion in every circumstance and condition. To put it another way, in Jesus the revolution is completed. We don't need anything else to be formally changed before we get on with the lives to which God calls us.

*Put another way, Jesus was not merely a transformation of prophet and priest from Hebrew scriptures, he was also a transformation of King. He was a King for whom the greatest among you is a servant to all. The core question of this sermon is, **will you join Jesus in sharing the role of government as servant to all?***

Christmas is a story against all the odds, a story that believes that things can really be different. If you are still hoping that we're not stuck in the same old, same old, then this is a story for you. My message this morning is that our United States needs to be transformed in many ways and getting involved in governance is one dimension of sharing the load

with those who are seeking a bright new day, a nation with liberty and justice for all.

I believe that Christians helped to create and refine democracy as a way to resist oppression and express justice and compassion. We are thankfully not faced with the choice Jesus faced. We can work for political transformation without expecting to be killed for it. But my reasons for urging a political caring is more than a nostalgic patriotism. It is not enough to merely celebrate the form of democracy. In fact, I would say to you that it is hard to fully appreciate democracy unless you become involved. I treasure democracy because I am radically hoping for a transformed new society with liberty and justice for all and I'm thankful that I can pursue such a dream with you without the likelihood of crucifixion. Believe me, there is plenty of pressure even in my relatively protected position of representing the General Synod of the United Church of Christ.

The tough part of this message is that it all starts with caring for others and not just for oneself. So I ask you the kind of question that I think Jesus was asking in his day. Do you really care that people are homeless, that more and more working families are falling into deepening poverty, that environmental gains of the last few decades are threatened, that the number of those without medical insurance is rapidly growing and those with Medicare or Medicaid are seriously threatened?

[Pause]

I know a lot of people are feeling cynical and alienated about government these days. A lot of money is being spent to attack government by corporate interests that want to disarm government regulation. The press is far more interested in the stories about failure and corruption than the stories of success. In fact some people believe the government can't do anything right. Perhaps one story to the contrary will help.

[tell waterway cleanup story]

There are other good stories of government as well. For example, the government pays for most of the basic research and education on science that has made so many positive things possible in this century. But I know the bad stories as well. And there is only one answer to them. Our government isn't going to get better until more people act together out of a caring for justice and compassion.

I don't mean to avoid the complexities of achieving good government but a lot of it really isn't very complex.

We know we can do better than the current situation for three simple reasons.

- We have seen how some programs work and don't work. In some cases we just need to meet existing program standards and provide adequate resources. For example, in a lot of towns, child welfare workers are carrying 3, 4 and 10 times their recommended case loads.
- We also know we can do better because this nation has done better in the past. At one time, for example, the Minimum Wage was worth \$6.25 an hour in current dollars. A full-time minimum wage worker could support a small family at the poverty level. Now the effort to raise the minimum Wage is met by the challenge that it will eliminate jobs and hurt the economy even though that did not happen when it was raised to the equivalent of \$6.25.
- We also know we can do better because, on some issues, we can see that other nations are doing better than we are with less resources. On health care, for example, other nations are certainly struggling but they are currently covering everyone in their society and we are not.

If you are confused about where to start in figuring out what

to do, I suggest you consider the General Synod resolutions of the United Church of Christ. The more experience I have had with them, the more I believe they represent a lot of caring and wisdom. But even if you disagree with one or more of the UCC resolutions, it is important that we gather in mutual respect to sustain transforming dialogue out of a gospel derived caring and hope.

I read a lot of science fiction and fantasy for relaxation. Currently I'm in the middle of the Fionavar Tapestry trilogy. Like a lot of this genre, the political setting is feudal. The conflict is between a good king and evil powers. The good King cares for his people while the evil power is a person focused on his own desires. Like the writer of Matthew, Guy Gabriel Kaye, poses a simple question, will you risk yourself on the side of caring for the whole people or would you rather just be left alone to get everything you can for yourself.