

PUTTING THE POWERS ON NOTICE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

Sometimes the first line in a story gives us a clue to the whole thing. Take **A Tale of Two Cities**, for instance, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” Or **Moby Dick**’s memorable starting point, “Call me Ishmael.” The book of Genesis launches tellingly, “In the beginning God...” and from the outset we know what the focus of interest will be.

In that vein, there are a number of ways to set the mood of a story from the outset. We all know the feeling that settles in when a story begins, *once upon a time...* Of course, when the plot starts like that, we know that what we will hear is not in our time, but some other time, and yet a time enough like our own that we are immediately drawn into what is happening as if it were here and now.

Edee Fenimore, my interim colleague and long time friend, is one of the best story tellers anywhere and she always begins her stories ever so tantalizingly this way: *a long, long time ago, or perhaps not so long ago, in a far distant place, or perhaps not...* and with those words you feel as if you have walked through the looking glass with Alice into another realm where anything can happen, and, as you soon discover, does.

Luke as a storyteller is different. That kindly author of the gospel and of the book of Acts as well, whose social conscience is so strong, whose gentleness toward women is obvious, whose interest in healing stories tells us so much about his own interests, and whose ability to tell and embellish a story is legendary, early in his account of the life of Jesus tells about the ministry of John the Baptist. And rather than begin *once upon a time*, he starts quite differently with names and dates... and politicians.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanius was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Not much poetry there. Not much to set the soul on fire. No spiritually uplifting nuggets to be mined in such a mundane list of political functionaries, a few of them akin to county executives and township party bosses. And yet there is an important comparison under way, even if we don’t quite get it at first.

It’s almost as if Luke has gone out of his way to place the historical setting so carefully that we cannot but trip over it. The historians, for instance, would tell us that the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius would be 28-29 A.D. Pontius Pilate was prefect (not actually governor) of Judea from 26-36 A.D. Caiaphas and Annas, the high priests are noted in John’s gospel as judges when Jesus goes on trial, so even their mention is not wasted.

Now if I were a film director taking my cues from Luke’s writing, and I was shooting this opening, my first scene would be a panorama of the splendor of Rome’s

power and authority in the region. I would show the swords of centurions being sharpened on grinding stones in a military courtyard. The strength and beauty of horses with strong flanks and towering height, saddled and equipped with elaborate equestrian appointments.

I would show the splendid palace of Tiberius, the courtyard beauty of Pilate's home, rich fabrics and tapestries on the walls and in the porticos, the glorious extravagance of the ruling class.

The clothing would be of ermine and silk, purples and reds, the most costly of dyes, and add gold and silver appointments with every broach and buckle. The women would wear lavish hairstyles and beautiful jewelry. The men bear body armor accentuating strength and physicality. And all of the grand buildings of the Roman occupation would show the architectural accomplishment of pediments and porticos and paladia.

After focusing the camera's eye on the glories of Rome's power and authority, I would cut immediately to the desert, to the hills and wasteland of the wilderness, to a wadi, a stream across the Israeli-Jordanian border, the Jordan River, where a wild man with a beard and a leather loin cloth and a bare and hairy chest and a penchant for snacking on locusts dripped in wild honey stands knee deep in the water preaching a gospel of repentance.

The contrast would be unmistakable, and the difference startling. One laid aside the other, the power of Rome vs. the powerlessness of a screwball, a prophet out of step with the powers of this world, preaching a gospel of repentance, announcing that every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill brought low, the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain and the glory of the Lord, not the glory of Rome, but the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. In a time of heavy handed governance and political fear, John bears a message of heavenly hope for human habitants.

This is the way Luke wants us to see the world that Jesus enters. His nativity story that just precedes this is similar, a story of contrasting powers and authorities. An angel announces to Mary the birth of a child, by the Holy Spirit, and Mary sings that God will bring down the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich empty away.

And when is the child born, according to Luke? In the midst of a political imposition in which the Emperor Augustus, has laid upon his people a census for tax purposes, where even a pregnant woman in the late stages of her bearing must travel by pack animal to the city of her husband's lineage, risking her pregnancy. That's real!

For Luke there are two opposite and conflicting powers on the human scene, the powers of heaven and the powers of earth. And don't we need to hear about that just about now? Somehow this Christmas the powers that dominate our lives, especially the power and influence of earthly things stands in starkest contrast to the unseen things. The world is so much with us these days.

Tuesday night I took a turn helping at the shelter that we provide in the parlor each evening for ten homeless men. About 9:15 the men came in quietly, had a snack and started to fall into the sack. Each man had a story written on his face, one that could

fill a volume, if you had the time. But the point was to get some sleep, so no one really said very much.

I couldn't help noticing, however, the stark contrast unfolding right there, the power of the world laid side by side with the power of love. Across Twelfth Street visible in the windows of the parlor you could see inside the Forbes building, *The Capitalist's Tool* as it likes to call itself, the chandeliers and executive suites of the top brass shined brightly out of the windows and into the parlor, harsh to the eyes of the men from the street. By sleeping time, they had pulled the shades and blocked out the glare of mahogany row, settling instead for the makeshift darkness of the parlor, the comfort of a warm bed in an unfamiliar room, and the quietness of a night in an inn where there was space enough for them.

The power of the world and the power of God's reign in contrast side by side.

Ever since Thanksgiving I have been wondering what in the world all that rush for toys and games and computers was a few weeks ago. *The New York Times*, not usually given to sentimentality, ran an editorial a few days after Thanksgiving that read like a Baptist sermon.

Comparing the mad dash at the doors of America's suburban malls to the "Vandal sack of Rome", *The Times* decried the fact that this happened on Thanksgiving night itself, some of the stores opening at 9:00 p.m. The opinion editor wrote:

With the snappy nickname of Black Friday, the traditional post-Thanksgiving sales have turned into a self-perpetuating hype machine. ...Shoppers behaving badly is an old story. Offer a limited supply of deeply discounted goods and people will wrestle over them, whether wedding gowns, refrigerators, or Elmo dolls. But shopping on Thanksgiving is something new and sinister. ...the aisles... populated by linebacker-sized husbands fighting over flat-screen televisions and video-game consoles.¹

Is this how we get ready for Christmas?

I think in contrast of the rubble in downtown Baghdad, the few hours of electricity that that city is able to provide on any given day; now week after week, month after month. The lack of police protection, hospital services, obstetric care, poor people living with cancer and depression without treatment, and hungry children, people cut off from their livelihood.

And then I think of the images of barefooted men, the faithful of Islam, kneeling on prayer rugs facing Mecca, called to prayer five times a day beginning at five in the morning, about the time that people on this side of the world are lining up for bargains at the mall, and it is an unsightly and disturbing comparison when laid against the Christianity that we profess, and what we have made of it.

Christmas is not toys or computers or Playstations. It is not about lining up at the stores to get something extravagant for those who are already overly indulged. It is the annual remembrance of the birth of a savior born to a family who had nothing save the warmth provided by a stable lantern and the joyful delivery of a baby boy born amid the darkness of a traveling night.

The war in Afghanistan and Iraq has now exceeded the time this nation was engaged in World War II. Every day our television screens are filled with visions of exploded cars and burning busses and weeping husbands and wives and parents kneeling over the lifeless draped figure of someone robbed of life too soon.

Our nation is politically divided, while the future in the region of the Middle East looks bleak, “grave and deteriorating” the bipartisan report said of conditions on the ground in Iraq. Perhaps only days or weeks remain before the government there collapses and civil war breaks out in even more earnest. It is not a situation that bodes well for years to come.

We live and have lived since 9/11 in a culture of fear. War and rumors of war, signs of impending doom, violence overseas and violence in the streets of our own city. We barely talk of danger to ourselves anymore or allow it, but there is this awareness back in the mind of all of us that this city has been under attack before and could be again.

It is, I suppose, revealing that Hollywood this Christmas season has sent out a cavalcade of violent and discouraging movies, *Blood Diamond* about the conflict gem trade, and *Apocalypto*, a movie by Mel Gibson in which beating hearts are torn from living victims and beheadings are depicted as if we did not have enough of the real thing already. If art mimics life, what a life!

Thank goodness Christmas is on its way. But not because it offers us an escape, a chance to drink ourselves into a boozy haze at the annual office party, or to run the gamut of holiday tree trimming events in the homes of friends. Not because we are meant to OD on the glut of candy canes and chocolate Santas pushing up our cholesterol count and cementing plaque in our arteries. The real goodness of Christmas drawing near has nothing to do with the hype that surrounds the season at all, the overjoyed exuberance of kids ready to wet their pants with the excitement of the showroom at FAO Schwartz. In fact, the whole idea that Christmas is for children could not be farther from the real heart of the matter.

Oh, Christmas is for children, all right, but not exclusively, and not because of the toys or the playful look of the city’s landscape twinkling in colorful lights. Christmas is for kids and teenagers and young adults and young couples. It’s for older people too, for the middle aged whoever they are, for the divorced, for the never married, and the newly married, and the troubled married, and the married even if the law doesn’t allow them to be married. It’s for those so young they have no idea what all the hubbub is about, and it is for the really, really older ones among us who have seen a lot of Christmases, and better ones and worse ones too.

Christmas is for those who have just broken up with someone with whom they thought they never would. It’s for those who have never loved, or loved from afar and never had that love returned. It’s for the newly diagnosed, and the ones who are undiagnosed but who are just as surely dying, and its for the ones who are living as-never-before living on the cancer ward, the ones who walk the lonely way of uncertainty and unknowing. It’s for those who have just lost their job, and those who are bored with their job, and those who can’t keep a job or find one.

Christmas is for adults, every bit as much as for children.

Christmas is the good news that God *has* made right and *will* make right in this world what we, left to our own devices, have made so wrong. It's about God coming down from heaven to earth and taking human form and sharing our lot, knowing our joys and sorrows, experiencing our pain, living our life.

And for all that we have done to make it into a story *once upon a time*, the witness of those like Luke who have given us the story, is that in the most unlikely time, in a most unworthy world, our world, he came.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, ...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas... he came.

He came to put the powers of earth on notice that injustice shall come to an end. That swords, many as they are, will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and some day, even if it is not yet today, nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more.

It was Bishop Fulton Sheen some years ago who pointed us all uptown to the corner of this Fifth Avenue to Fifty-First Street where across from each other are the two fundamental and contrasting symbols of life. On the one side of the avenue is Atlas, the power of human might, bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders, bent down by the heaviness of all that he balances above him.

On the other side of the street directly opposite Atlas is the high altar of St. Patrick's Cathedral, where the host is lifted above the table and the body of Christ is broken for the world.

And the question with which Advent leaves us, on our way toward Christmas is, which of the two do you believe holds the greater hope for the world?

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¹ NYTimes, November 28, 2006, A22