

Our Children...Our Future

Christmas Eve Remarks

Rev. Steven Epperson

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How many times have you heard someone say: “Children are our future”?—probably so often now that it just unspools in the background like so much Muzak. Well, I think that if Christmas is telling us anything, it’s saying that we shouldn’t take this statement for granted. For the fact is, there’s something provocative, even seditious in that message that we adults need to hear.

There’s a story in the Christian scripture, and it only appears in one of the gospels which has led a whole lot of scholars and historians to think that it never really took place. Doesn’t really matter, some truths of myth are truer even than historical fact; so I’m going to tell it, especially on this night. In the second chapter of the gospel of Matthew, the story goes like this: shortly after the birth of Jesus, Joseph is warned in a dream that his family must flee to Egypt and stay there for safety because King Herod is going to search for their child and kill him. Remember Herod? He’s the one visited by the three Magi from the East who’d been following a star heralding the birth of a king. Curiously, the star didn’t rest above the royal palace but was leading the Magi to another site altogether. Herod commissioned them to find the place, the infant resting beneath that heavenly sign, and to return to the palace and report their findings. As the story goes, they too were warned in a dream not to return to Herod; and so after presenting the infant with their treasures, they returned to their homeland.

Kings do not like being made fools, nor do they sit idly by with the prospect of a growing rival to their power. And so, Matthew tells us, Herod sent his troops to Bethlehem with orders to

search out and kill all the boys who were two years old or under—for one of them may have had that star bending low above his cradle.

Children are our future? Well, just this past week in Peshawar, Pakistan, there were men who, like Herod, didn't believe or want to hear this message at all. And so they entered a school and destroyed the lives of hundreds of families.

What is it about a child that could compel men do such atrocious things? The Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran gives us a clue when he wrote nearly a century ago—

Your children are not your children
They are the sons and daughters
of life's longing for itself...
You may give them your love but not your thoughts
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
Which you cannot visit,
Not even in your dreams.

That they dwell in the house of tomorrow, children of life's longing, thinking their own thoughts—a child tells us that they can outgrow our dogmas, that we can't determine their thoughts and actions, that we are not masters of the universe, and thus, the future is radically open and beyond our control. It's a message that dogmatic power freaks have a hard time taking in and living with when faced with their own limits and mortality. And so in deep denial, from one generation to another, all-too-often, people my age, at the height of their power, war against the young, and seek to foreclose that future by trying to create it in their own image. A tragic fool's errand.

One of the most remarkable things about the Christmas story is how hard Christians have worked to bury its message, and his message. That the *most divine thing in the world* was “born in a random shed on the back streets of a small town in the Middle East”; a powerless infant,

crying, hungry, incapable of even looking after himself who went on to live in the house of tomorrow thinking his own thoughts, and teaching, what would become central to his message to the world: the first will be last and last first. Sounds like a phrase from the French revolution, writes the Anglican priest Giles Fraser, with the mighty pulled down from their thrones and the weak being held up high. For that matter, sounds like one of those puzzling things a Taoist sage said: “Can you let your body become as supple as a newborn child’s?...Giving birth and nourishing, having without possessing, acting with no expectations, leading and not trying to control: this is the supreme virtue.” (*Tao Te Ching*, 10). As though the only power is no power.

No wonder Herod and the Herods in today’s world would reach out and try to control the narrative, creating gods after their own likeness, and close the doors to that house of tomorrow.

Children are *our* future? Maybe one of the reasons this statement tends to go in one ear and out the other, is that deep down, we know it’s not quite true. Because, in fact, children are not *our* future; children are *their* own future...they *are the* future. **They** live in the house of tomorrow, not us. They’ll be thinking their own thoughts, dreaming their own dreams, and hopefully, making the world a better place than we have created.

And here’s my question: Are we listening to them, giving way to them, being as generative as we can in our turn?

In closing, and as we prepare to light real candles in this quiet place of beauty, I would like to share these Christmas thoughts, written by Charles Dickens:

What Christmas Is As We Grow Older

“Therefore, as we grow older, let us be more thankful that the circle of our Christmas associations and of the lessons that they bring expands! Let us welcome every one of them, and summon them to take their places by the Christmas hearth.

Welcome, old aspirations, glittering creatures of an ardent fancy, to your shelter underneath the holly! We know you, and have not outlived you yet. Welcome, old projects and old loves, however fleeting, to your nooks among the steadier lights that burn around us. Welcome, all that was ever real to our hearts; and for the earnestness that made you real, thanks be to Heaven! Lost friend, lost child, lost parent, sister, brother, husband, wife, we shall not discard you! You shall hold your cherished places in our Christmas hearts, and by our Christmas fires; and in the season of immortal hope and mercy, we shall shut out Nothing!”

As we light our candles, may we rededicate ourselves this evening to what Dickens encouraged us to do: to “welcome, all that was ever real to our hearts,” and so fulfill the words of the Christmas carol “Joy to the World” dedicated to an infant, to all our children everywhere as they come into the world: Let every heart prepare [a] room... so that heaven and nature will truly sing.

May we go from this place in peace and harmony: generative adults, and children of vision and the future. May it be so.