

Birth of a Movement

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On of my favorite spiritual writers, the Franciscan monk, Richard Rohr, wrote this wonderful and insightful passage:

[Christianity] began as a revolutionary nonviolent movement promoting a new kind of aliveness on the margins of society. . . . It claimed that everyone, not just an elite few, had God-given gifts to use for the common good. It exposed a system based on domination, privilege, and violence and proclaimed in its place a vision of mutual service, mutual responsibility, and peaceable neighborliness. It put people above profit, and made the audacious claim that the Earth belonged not to rich tycoons or powerful politicians, but to the Creator who loves every sparrow in the trees and every wildflower in the field. It was a peace movement, a love movement, a joy movement, a justice movement, an integrity movement, an aliveness movement.

I love this passage, but it is challenging. Not many view Christianity as a movement that challenges the status quo. Instead, Christianity has morphed into a belief system that centers around a single person. And by focusing on believing things about its leader—believing that he was the son of God, that he was divine, that he was born to a virgin mother, Mary—by focusing on these, the power of the movement is sometimes absent, lost under layers of sentimentality.

But Jesus wouldn't want the focus to be simply on himself. He deflected the efforts to make it about him. "Don't call me good," he said, "only God who is in heaven is good."

So I want to encourage you, just for a few minutes this morning, to consider the Christmas story in a different way.

We live in an age when hardly anyone is said to be a son of God anymore. But this was not the case in the ancient world in which Jesus lived. In Jesus' time there were lots of people who were proclaimed to be sons of God, complete with miraculous birth stories. Plato, Alexander the Great, the philosopher Apollonius, Caesar Augustus, the Egyptian pharaohs, and on and on. All of these sons of God were accompanied by stories of miraculous signs, stars, divine parentage, and harrowing escapes from jealous leaders.

This is important why? Because Matthew was doing what was a rather common practice: citing evidence that his leader was extraordinary and of divine lineage. As New Testament scholar, Dominic Crossan wrote, "A marvelous life and death demands and gets, in retrospect, a marvelous conception and birth." (p.6, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*)

Every year we celebrate the coming birth of Jesus, but we rarely put his birth into the context of his own history. But it is important to do so, it seems to me, to see the contrast between Jesus as

the son of God and all the other sons of God. Another New Testament scholar, James Dunn, wrote:

The language of divine sonship and divinity was in widespread and varied use in the ancient world and would have been familiar to the contemporaries of Jesus, Paul and John in a wide range of applications.

You might be thinking about now, “O.K. Steve, are you saying that these fantastic stories about Jesus’ birth didn’t really happen?” Yes. But that doesn’t mean they aren’t true! It appears that these legends about Jesus emerged long after he died to help convey the truth of the enormous significance of his life. Don’t let the idea that these were lovely, made up stories disturb you. Because they point to an amazing and liberating reality. As the writer, Neil Gaiman said, “Fiction is a lie that tells us true things over and over.”

It shouldn’t threaten us that the Bible is a human product, a testimony of their experiences of God. It shouldn’t threaten us that the Bible is a combination of both history and metaphor. It shouldn’t threaten us the our ancestors mythologized their history. The problem comes with later generations, including ours, that have liberalized their metaphors and myths.

Dominic Crossan wrote,

It is not enough, therefore, to keep saying that Jesus was not born of a virgin, not born of David’s lineage, not born in Bethlehem, that there was not stable, no shepherds, no star, no Magi, no massacre of the infants, and no flight into Egypt. All of that is quite true [they didn’t happen], but it still begs the question of who he was and what he did that caused his followers to make such claims. (p.27-28)

One clue to the answer to this question was that Jesus, unlike the other “sons of God” of his time, did not belong to the aristocracy. Rather, this “carpenter’s son” was in the lower class peasantry, living on the edge of survival.

Why is this important? A century and a half after Jesus died, when the emperor Marcus Aurelius was persecuting the Christians, the philosopher Celsus did not find the claim of divinity itself absurd. What he found absurd was the idea that the *peasant Jesus* could be divine. What had *he* done to deserve such a birth? Celsus wrote dismissively:

First, however, I must deal with the matter of Jesus, the so-called savior, who not long ago taught new doctrines and was thought to be the son of God... Taking its root in the lower classes, the religion continues to spread among the vulgar: nay, one can say it spreads because of its vulgarity and the illiteracy of its adherence.

Unlike today, the amazing claim was *not* that someone could be the son of God. That was a well known description. But what was audacious was the claim that someone *like Jesus* could be the son of God.

Jesus lit the fire of a movement centered on the vision of a different kind of world—the Kingdom of God, which uplifted the destitute, the powerless and the forgotten. In contrast to the violence of the empire protecting the status quo and privilege of the elite, this was a revolutionary nonviolent movement promoting a new kind of aliveness on the margins of society.

This Kingdom of God movement of Jesus has two dimensions. First, it is a movement to become alive and awake to the New Reality—a Reality of oneness, of unconditional love. It is a movement of internal transformation. Second, the movement of Jesus was external, that the Kingdom may be fulfilled “on earth as in heaven.” It was a movement to bring justice and liberation, to bring true sisterhood and brotherhood to all humanity.

And so, Christmas is not just about the birth of Jesus. It’s about the birth of a movement!

And this movement to transform the world into the heavenly kingdom is still alive! His movement of nonviolent resistance to injustice is still alive. His movement where the last are first, of solidarity with the outcasts, the nobodies, the poor, the refugees, and the vulnerable is still alive. His movement of compassion and radical equality, that threatens tyrants, the wealthy and the powerful is still alive. And he beckons us to join it.

Crossing said, “Killing Jesus was like trying to destroy a dandelion seed head by blowing on it.” The teaching, the movement, the power could not be killed.

Jesus’ awareness of God led him to challenge injustice, to live with compassion toward others, to be filled with inner calm and happiness. And his life and teaching can still inspire us to keep his movement and his vision alive. And the same Divine Wisdom that awakened him can awaken and restore our spirits.

Merry Christmas!