

## WGUMC Christmas Eve 2011 "Occupy Bethlehem"

Two years ago I was preparing a Christmas Eve sermon as a big storm hit Washington D.C. and Congress was having a snowball fight over health care reform. This year, no snow, but the sky was still falling over the payroll tax cut. Our legislators seem to think that we should celebrate crisismas instead of Christmas. So I think we're all about ready to go "in heart and mind" to Bethlehem (or anywhere but the Beltway). For one night, maybe we can escape from what's getting to be a pretty tiresome political story by immersing ourselves in a timeless biblical story.

But there's no escape, really. If you read it closely, you'll see that there was crisismas in that very first Christmas, with all the lunatic politics that go with it. "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world (the Roman world, that is) should be registered." And everyone had to go back to their ancestral village. I can just imagine everyone in

the known world having to line up at the 1<sup>st</sup>-century equivalent of their hometown DMV. Pretty scary.

We can thank the Roman Empire for public baths and bureaucracy. But the decree that went out did not just create jobs for ancient bureaucrats. We all know the real explanation for the census. There could only be one reason the Romans wanted to count people and that was to tax them. So read the newspaper or read your Bible. Either way you'll get a story about taxes this Christmas!

In the first century, as in the twenty-first, it was the little people who had to pay. All the way to Bethlehem, Joseph is probably grumbling about the burdens of occupation. The Romans are in charge and the more the people rebel, the more they charge.

Joseph is part of the 99% and not too happy about it. On top of that, Mary's about to have a baby and she's weary from the journey and, when they finally arrive, there's no vacancy.

But whether Joseph knows it or not, God is coming to occupy Bethlehem tonight. The Romans only think they occupy all the seats of power in Palestine. They can't begin to conceive of a power that would come to occupy a manger—and then stay to reign forever.

That's a power that we need nowadays. That's a power the Occupy folks could sure use today. As you know, Occupy Wall Street is a movement that got started this last September, motivated by a completely understandable anger. But what it needs right now, what the world needs right now, is Occupy Bethlehem. That movement started a few thousand years ago and is motivated not by anger, but by a completely incomprehensible love.

Now Occupy Wall Street has been faulted for not having clear goals, but Occupy Bethlehem has a most definite agenda: "God so loved the world that God gave the only-begotten Son...Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to

condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." [John 3:16-7]

So, we can occupy Wall Street, Main Street, Your Street, My Street, but unless we also let God occupy us, we can't make this a better world, only an angrier one. So, where is the Bethlehem that God is coming to occupy this Christmas? Where is the place where the Word will be made flesh and where God's love will live among us? From Wall Street to Willow Glen, where will the Christ child enter in?

I believe that if we want God to occupy Bethlehem today, we're going to have to build it first. When my daughter was just three years old, I got her a punch-out paper nativity in a book called "Build a Bethlehem." And it made me think how we all have to do that. We all have to build our own Bethlehem. We have to construct a place in our lives where Christ can come in, throw up a tent and occupy us until we join the movement,

until we agree to his demands: to love the world enough to save it.

Now movements take a long time and the people in them get pretty weather-beaten, so our Bethlehem needs to be a sturdy place. We need to lay a strong foundation of love, then build the walls of justice, hang the doors of mercy, install the windows of faith and hope and over it all secure the roof of peace. Now wouldn't that be a lovely barn for God to be born in?

As our movement song, we'll sing: "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

And on one level we'd be singing about a place in Palestine. But on another level we'd be singing about places in the heart. Let's not become so preoccupied with the crisis

in our lives that we sleepwalk right through the Christmas. And when we find ourselves wandering the dark streets of the world, let's keep straining to see that everlasting light. All because we know that all our hopes and all our fears are met in Christ tonight. Here into our hopeful darkness, here into our fearful hearts, Christ comes.

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear its coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in."

Unlike the coming of the new Air Jordan tennis shoes that sparked riots across the Bay Area yesterday, there probably won't be lines out the door all night to meet him. Nor will there be gun-shots in the parking lot of his birth. No, the violent will not hear him coming. Nor will the powerful. The King Assad's of the world, the ones who spend their lives looking down,

pressing down on everyone all around, have no time and no inclination to be looking up. So they won't see the star.

Only meek souls will see and receive him. The anonymous Santa's at Kmart who paid off the Christmas debt of the poor this year will see him. Our youth who washed the feet of the homeless and prayed with strangers in the Tenderloin will see him. And the rest of us still have a chance.

Not just 99%, but all 100% of us need this song, need to grab hold of this story, need to join the movement to build a Bethlehem in our hearts. For only if our hearts are ready to be occupied by that much love can we come together to build a Bethlehem in our world. Only then, can we overcome our own self-interest enough to go feed the hungry and also work to abolish the hunger, to go visit with the sick and work to eradicate the disease, to go clothe the naked and become a tireless advocate for the poor.

Only if Christ occupies us, not just on this night, but on every night, throughout the years, will we have the selflessness and the courage and the perseverance we need to demand justice for that worker, housing for that homeless person, treatment for that addict, rehabilitation for that criminal, and forgiveness for that enemy. Only when Christ occupies the 99% will conditions be right to convert the 1% and put an end to war and send out a decree of peace for our world. Only then will we know what Bethlehem looks like, my friends.

So let us pray on this and every day, "O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel." Merry Christmas.