

Christmas Eve Meditation 2024

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A pastor was addressing the children during a Christmas service. “Who is the mother of Jesus?” he asked them.

Without hesitation, dozens of tiny voices chorused back “Mary.”

“That's right,” he said. “Now who can tell me who is the father of Jesus?”

Suddenly the room grew quiet. No one quite had an answer for that.

Then one of the slightly older girls spoke up. With great self-assurance, she announced, “I know! It's Verg.”

A few seconds later the adults in church erupted in laughter.

Not to be put off by this rude behavior from the grown-ups she continued, “Yes it is! We all know it. It's Verg 'n Mary.”

We might all be feeling a little “on the verge” ourselves right now. It's Christmas Eve, and once more we are facing uncertain times. The world is a chaotic and dangerous place, and almost every family I know is suffering from conflict and division as a result of politics. For most of my life, political differences in my family could be discussed in an open and respectful manner. Today, as the one with the primary host responsibility for family gatherings and I have made it clear that all discussion of politics must be left at the property line. And the Farrell family is far from unique. Some families have been so broken that they no longer speak to one another.

Our world is not uniquely broken, however. Jesus' world was fragmented too. Jews and Gentiles had nothing to do with one another, and observant religious Jews tended to look down on their more haphazard sisters and brothers and exclude them as “not real Jews.” Politics in Israel was also divided. There were the secular and wealthy members of society who wanted to assimilate with Rome. There were Zealots advocating outright rebellion. There was the Sanhedrin, the religious and political authority who had a lot invested in maintaining the status quo. There were the scholars and Pharisees, the ancestors of modern Rabbinic Judaism. And overruling all was the mighty Roman Empire with Caesar Augustus at its head, a huge bureaucracy and soldiers on every street corner. Factions abounded in the 1st century, as they do today. And as anxious as many of us are right now, there are far more dangerous places in the world to be. At least so far, we have the luxury of being able to complain without being arrested. That was not true in the 1st century.

Jesus was born into danger. His life was in danger the moment he entered the world. And practical steps were taken by his parents and others to protect him. Herod, the puppet king put in power by Rome, sought to destroy anyone who threatened his absolute hold on power. Without being too specific, this included members of his own family, including his wife, her mother and grandfather and three out of his nine sons. He was called Herod the Great

because he built a lot of great public buildings, including the Temple, but he wasn't great if you were related to him.

We all know that there is violence in the world even when we prefer to ignore it. And we are sadly aware of how politics have ripped apart our families. But God sent Jesus to help us find our way home. Divine nature and human nature united in one human being, so that through faith in him we might be made whole. That is the wonder of the incarnation. The infinite God of the universe took on the very finite and limited form of a baby born into poverty, in a land where justice was a rare thing, and political conflict raged.

Jesus knows what it is like to live in our world. He knows what it is like to be ruled by leaders who put themselves first, at the expense of those they are supposed to serve. And this same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem grew up and challenged unjust authorities. He dared to question. He dared to speak truth, and he calls us to do the same. He was born into a peasant family in a busy, complex world, dominated by a ruler named Caesar Augustus, a man who claimed for himself the title "Prince of Peace," a man who even demanded that he be worshipped. We live in a world run by people like Caesar Augustus.

At Christmas, no matter what lay ahead this year, no matter how many political debates we dodge this Christmas season, let us take time to remember who has come into the world and what God has done for us. We are not alone. Our Emmanuel, God with us, has come. Amen.