

Advent IV, December 22, 2019
St. John's Episcopal Church
Linden Hills, Minneapolis
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Jesus, son of Mary of Nazareth, was born when Augustus was Emperor of Rome. In Israel. A Roman Province. Much later, people would give great titles to him. But Jesus was nothing like Augustus, the adopted son of the great Julius Caesar. Under his leadership, the Roman Empire took over the whole Mediterranean world, from Palestine on the edge of the Arabian desert to Spain on the edge of the world. He ordered roads built all over the Empire, and relays of couriers who would run from post to post with messages which now took days, not weeks. He began the Pax Romana, 200 years of Roman Peace. He was born Octavian, but history knows him as Caesar Augustus. There's still a monument to him in modern Turkey. It reads:

*all praise and honor due to him, the Savior of the World,
the Prince of Peace,
the Son of God.*

If you had asked any Roman person in Jesus' day, "who's the Prince of Peace," or, "who's the Son of God" everybody would have known the answer: "Caesar Augustus!" The Roman Senate voted him the title. If you had said that they were wrong, that the Prince of Peace was a Jewish guy, or that the Son of God was working in a carpenter's shop, or that the Savior of the World did not command an army, they would have laughed.

Jesus was Jewish: a well-known religion, for sure, but difficult: Only one God. No lying or adultery, no vengeance killings, no statues, no taking advantage of widows or throwing orphans out into the storm. Go easy on the wine and study hard. And there is also that little operation all their men had to have. To toxic masculinity, it seemed like a *weakling's religion*.

And the Son of God a working class person? Give me a break. If one of the gods came down to earth, it would be someone famous: a general's son. Not a geometry teacher. Not a shepherd or a blacksmith. If one of the gods incarnated, he would be male, of course. A patrician. A senator. Royalty. How else could God change the world?

Or God would be a prince like the Buddhist Siddhartha or the Hindu Krishna. Or a celebrity. God would turn up in the middle of battle and zap the Romans with thunderbolts. Thor! Spider Man! Wolverine!

Right! Like when Zeus fell for the mortal woman Alkmene, and they had a son Herakles. The Romans called him Hercules. Sure, Incarnation was possible, in short, but your Jesus story was not.

Fifteen years or so ago, Professor Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki came to St. John's and gave some lectures about Jesus and Process Theology. The idea that all reality is *becoming*, including God. Since the future does not yet exist, God tries to steer us into a future of community, justice, creativity, and love. God is a process, a verb, a developing story. I still remember the way she described God becoming human.

Everyone in those days knew who was up and who was down. Like a ladder, people had their own level in society...

On top were the gods, with Zeus in charge.

angels (such as guardian angels)

seraphim (helpers) and cherubim (like Cupid)

divine rulers like Caesar and Pharaoh

human males of the highest rank, like kings

high ranking males, like noblemen

males who owned property

low ranking free males

Women, she noted, took the status of their fathers, and then husbands.

male slaves

female slaves

children (four categories, dependent on their fathers' status. **IF** they had legal fathers):

1. legitimate sons (meaning they had family names)
2. legitimate daughters (with names, too, and they will marry & get new ones)
3. illegitimate daughters (no name now, but they can marry & get names)
4. illegitimate sons (no family name and no hope of ever having one).

Like Jesus, son of Mary. Born on the very lowest possible rung. Barely above the animals.

Christmas is about smashing the ladder. God came down from above, breaking one rung after another, and landed on the ground as a baby born on the lowest rung. Jesus' first job was to show that ladders, ranks, and levels mean nothing to

God. The three kings understood, a bit: this humble baby is destined for the top rung, so we will bring him gifts. The shepherds might not have understood that God cares nothing for ladders, but the angels' song told him that God was breaking through into their world.

As usual, God was doing something new. Something tiny, in a baby's helpless body. Something humble, close to the ground. Something very yin compared to the Roman's conquering yang. It's not like the famous Jacob's Ladder which appeared in a dream to reassure Jacob that God would always rescue him. This smashed ladder is the opposite. It's like God burned a bridge, or destroyed an escape route: I am here now, one of you. We can do this. I know the way. Follow me.

A church on the Mexico border put up a manger scene recently. You might have seen it. It's three cages made of chain link fencing, one for Mary, one for Joseph, and the middle one for the helpless baby. The Holy Family were once refugees in Egypt. Helpless and trapped. Their baby was in danger thanks to the people who make ladders and cages.

In our name, under our flag, in buildings like the one at Fort Snelling, named for our Bishop Henry Whipple, some officers carry out orders from people way up their ladders, who imagine that God destined them to send "these people" back. In the coming year, we have so much work to do. Vote. Help everyone vote. Help with the census. Send lawyers to the border. Visit detainees. Tutor struggling kids. Work for affordable housing. Make friends with someone very different from you. Donate to a cause you admire.

Because Jesus was born poor. In a captive nation. To an unwed mother. In lodging meant only for animals, maybe not caged, but not fit for humans to live. God smashed the ladder of hierarchy, resisted the temptations of privilege.

Jesus kept on being a resister, whose donkey parade on Palm Sunday mocked Pontius Pilate's solemn arrival on a white horse with hundreds of soldiers in gleaming armor and fluttering banners. Whose fury at organized religion led him to smash the money-changers' tables in the temple. A resister who dared the hypocrites to cast the first stone.

Born when God smashed a ladder, raised by a carpenter, and temporarily displayed on a mocking cross, Jesus fought for justice by every means except the sword, and so should we.

To remind me of the fierce love of our rabbi the carpenter, I made one more object for our family's wooden manger set, a broken ladder to remind me that the baby Jesus was not just humble, cute, and vulnerable. He is also resolute, grounded, and strong.

And so must we be.