

What Child is This?
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Christmas Eve Morning 2006

“What child is this who, laid to rest On Mary’s lap, is sleeping?”

Last week’s emotional dedication of children to the community focused on our children. How many of you parents have asked that question: “What Child Is This”? What Will My Child Be When He/She Grows Up? So also must Mary have asked What Child Is This?

Throughout history there have been men and women who stand out from the rest so starkly that we cannot but remember them; so many that when we mention some names you are shocked that other names have been left out. In our own time: Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Mahatmas Gandhi, and Mother Theresa.

Let me go back to one man who set the tone for so many who were to come – and still come today. His name was Diogenes, a philosopher from Turkey; he lived in Athens, Greece many years before Jesus. He knew Plato well, and died in Athens in the same year that Alexander the Great died in Baghdad.

His Cynic philosophy influenced Socrates and the Stoics; his lifestyle gave the impetus to Christian monasteries and convents, and to the philosophy of Nietzsche and the Existentialists of today.

He was crusty and crudely funny and insulting --- and without fear. Let me tell two things make him stand out; two things that make me think of Jesus and John the Baptist:

- 1) To insure that he would never fear anyone or anything, he chose to have absolutely nothing to lose. He chose poverty and had no possessions of any kind. He lived in the same cloak all his adult years, he made a tub his home, and he walked in snow without boots to test his courage.

(When he saw child drink water from his hands, he was ashamed. He immediately threw away his drinking cup – his only possession! Throughout history aesthetic monks and nuns have tried to emulate that life by taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.)

- 2) He was a fearless critic who constantly attacked any wrongdoing by anyone in power. He championed the poor against all the powers that Athens used to abuse and take advantage of them.

There was a time when Alexander the Great came to see this famous man. He found Diogenes sunning himself in his tub. Alexander said to him: "Diogenes, I am in admiration of your lifestyle; but I'm sure there must be something you want. No matter what it is, I own the world! I can get it for you. Just ask." Diogenes replied, "Sir, you are standing in the sunlight; please just step aside."

The hymn goes on: "What child is this? Nails and spear shall pierce him through. The cross he bore for me, for you."

When I was a child I learned to say: "Lovely Jesus, meek and mild, teach me how to pray." Lovely? Meek and mild!? Did they ever get that one wrong! But that's what happens when you see Jesus in the context of a halo: because he wore a halo, we envision him as a miracle worker: he walked on water, he calmed the storm that was swamping the boat with water, he healed the sick, he fed thousands with bread and fish, he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. He was God in the flesh!

I don't want to go there; I want to look at Jesus the man, the Jewish man, stripped away from all the stories about him –and stripped of that halo. The "Historical Jesus". I want you to see him as the wonderful man he was.

"**What child is this?**" When I was a child I prayed: "Lovely Jesus, meek and mild, teach me how to pray." Meek and mild, my eye! He was a troublemaker; he called out the High Priests and the Scribes and Pharisees and faced down to the power of the Roman army! I see Jesus without the halo, I see the Jesus who was more like Diogenes than anyone else. I think of him when I see the image of the young Chinese boy standing in front of the moving Army tank in Tiananmen Square, his hands hung by his side -- confronting the establishment!

Follow me on this. We don't know much about the childhood of Jesus. He seems to have been quite the normal young man. A carpenter who worked in Sepphoris, only three miles away. (To do business there, you had to speak Greek!)

Going back to the beginning of Mark's gospel, we hear about someone else living a weird life in the desert, someone who wore clothes made of camel's hair. This is like a hair shirt, something chosen because it continually itched and irritated the skin. He ate grasshoppers and wild honey. (I had a little girl in Sunday school who told the class: "My mother drinks grasshoppers.")

Jesus hears the stories about John in the desert. Jesus is in search of a mission; he comes to see John the Baptist for himself. And now Jesus has a paradigm shift. He is stunned by this man; and he is baptized by him in the Jordan River. Jesus is completely converted!

He becomes a disciple of John and spends the next 40 days in the wilderness, living by his wits, being tested for membership in John's small group.

Jesus would not be tied down by family. Shortly after his conversion by John the Baptist, and his forty days trial in the desert, he comes out of seclusion and preaches in every synagogue that will have him. His passion and fervor are startling; no one every heard such preaching as this.

Word gets back to his family in Nazareth and they think he had been abducted into a cult. He has to be out of his mind! This is not the Jesus they know! They search him out with the aim of taking him home with them.

Matthew 12: 46: “While Jesus was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and brothers came and stood outside. Someone told Jesus, ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside and want to talk with you.’ Jesus answered, ‘Who is my mother and who are my brothers?’ Then he pointed to his disciples and said, ‘These are my mother and my brothers and my sisters! Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!’”

The Gospel according to Mark, Chapter 6. It tells us how his neighbors see him when Jesus returns to Nazareth, his hometown –a completely changed man! Jesus goes to synagogue and teaches in the Jewish meeting place. And *he does not go over well with his neighbors!*

Mark states: “Many of the people who heard him were angry and asked ‘How can he do all this? Where did he get such wisdom and the power to work miracles? Isn’t he the carpenter, the son of Mary?’”

Mark goes on: “Aren’t James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon his brothers?” (That’s four brothers.) “Don’t his sisters still live here in our town?” (No mention of how many sisters, because in those times women did not matter.) So we can assume that Jesus was the oldest of a somewhat large family.

(By the way, it also gives an explanation to the story of the Marriage Feast at Cana when the wine ran out. To run out of wine at a marriage feast is a disgrace! The wine steward comes to Mary with the bad news. Scripture scholars figure that the wedding was for one of Jesus’ brothers, so Mary would have been the one responsible for the wine.)

But Jesus was the oldest son in the family. Why wasn’t he the first to wed? Could it be that, like Diogenes, he would not be held down by family?

Back now to John the Baptist. He challenges Herod Antipas, the ruler, the KING! He said to the king’s face: “You live in sin, because it is not right for you to take Herodias, the wife of your brother Philip.” Remember: John will not be shut up; he fears no man because he wants nothing and life itself is of no consequence to him.

Herod was the most monumental ruler of his time. (His civic works alone would mark him out for the title “Heriod the Great!”) But he would not take on John the Baptist! He feared what the people might do if he executed him; so he locked him up in prison instead. “Out of sight, out of mind.”

You probably know the rest of the story: Herod’s birthday party; he gets stoned, the daughter of Herodias does *the dance of the seven veils* for the guests and she is a smash hit. Herod is so pleased! He swore, before all his guests, to give her anything she wanted, even to half his kingdom!

The girl’s mother says “Ask for the head of John the Baptist --on a platter!” And that’s the end of John The Baptist, and the beginning of Jesus’ mission.

I won’t go into the miracles of Jesus. Theodore Parker, our famous UU Minister, spent a number of years trying to take an intelligent position on the miracles of Jesus. Finally, he settled on this: “If the teachings of Jesus are not self-evidently important, then any number of miracles used to prop up those teachings will not be enough.”

I will spend a minute or two on what I consider Jesus’ greatest miracle. Now there are two ways to interpret this miracle, and you are on your own to choose which of the two versions you prefer. A thousand (or more!) people in the desert. Everyone is hungry. Jesus’ disciples call his attention to this. “If we just dismiss them, many will fall by the wayside with hunger.” Jesus says, “Feed them.”

Confusion! How are we going to feed them? Over a thousand people! One young boy says, “I have a couple of loaves and fishes.” And Jesus feeds a thousand people in the desert.

One theory: Jesus pulls off a magic trick to beat all magic tricks. He multiplies those loaves and fishes into enough food to feed a thousand or more people! They just multiply in his hands, pop, pop, pop! And the disciples even filled up baskets with what was left over!

Another theory: The Jews all customarily carried a snack or two in the sleeves of their clothing. Pretty common thing to do if you’re going to be away from home for a long time in a desert area! No Fast Food joints in sight! But the thought of sharing with one another was an unthinkable thought! Jesus forced them to think outside the box. They shared what they had! A true miracle! Just the kind of leader these poor people needed and wanted: someone who could get them to work with one another for the common good!

“What child is this on Mary’s lap?”

A young man says, “I will follow you, but first let me bury my father.” (In other words, once the old man dies, I’ll find you and join up.) ”Let the dead bury the dead! Follow me now!” (Shades of “Just Do It!”)

Another says, “What do I have to do to be saved?” Jesus says, “You know the law: Love God and Love Your Fellow Man.” The young man says, “I’ve done that since my earliest years.” And Jesus looked on him and loved him. He says, “Well, if you would be perfect, sell everything you have; give it to the poor. Then come and follow me.” And the rich young man turned sadly away – because he had many riches.

When Jesus sent his disciples out on mission, he told them: “One robe, one staff. No moneybag! Beg for what you need! Stay with whoever invites you, and don’t move from house to house. Eat what they eat.”

He sent them out in twos, and Scripture scholars now speculate that they were often husband and wife. That makes sense to me.

What did he teach? Jesus called a spade a spade. “You have heard that it was said to our forefathers, ‘*You shall not murder, and whoever murders is liable to judgment?*’ Well let me tell you, that anyone who hates his brother will be liable to judgment.”

You have heard that it was said, “*You shall not commit adultery?* Well let me tell you, that anyone who harbors lust for a woman has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

You have heard that it was said, “*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth?* Well let me tell you, do not resist a wicked man. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other cheek to him also. And if anyone wants to take your shirt, let him have your coat as well. If a soldier forces you into service for one mile, go two miles with him. Give to everyone who asks, and don’t refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

(No revenge! No getting even! There is no way of getting even! As Gandhi said, “An Eye for an Eye? Soon all of India would be blind!”) Revenge is always wrong!

“Be careful not to do your righteous deeds in public, in order to be seen. When you give to charity, don’t blow a trumpet to announce it, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that people will praise them. Truly I tell you: they already have their reward!

But when you give charity, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing; keep your charity a secret; and your Father, who sees what is in secret, will reward you.”

In the Temple one very poor woman dropped two coins in the offertory. Others were depositing considerable sums into the box and they would blow the horn to emphasize their impressive offering. Jesus looked on this scene with contempt. “This woman,” he told his disciples, “has given more than all these others. They give of their plenty; she gives of the little she has.”

What would Jesus say of those who might give billions to charity? But not everything they have. They manage to struggle along quite well on the millions they have left! Could you manage on a few million? Jesus says, “Give all you have to the poor!”

You get the idea: Jesus is not meek and mild! Like Diogenes, he won’t shut up and won’t give in. He has nothing to lose – not even his own life.

Did he choose his own death? You be the judge. Throughout his mission he championed the poor. He even took on the High Priest of the Temple – the unbeatable foe. From what I’ve studied, it would seem that Annais and his Sons in law, *all high priests*, had a scam going that robbed the poor and enabled them to rake in a million or two shekles a year.

Here’s the deal. It’s Passover time. Thousands of Pascal lambs will be sacrificed in the Temple. People have to buy the sheep that are to be sacrificed. But the people can’t use the money they use in the marketplace because it has an image on it: the face of Caesar!

So they have to exchange their money for Temple money. You get the picture!? The Temple gets real money in exchange for “Temple” money – like giving Monopoly Money for real money!

Everybody seems to have known about it but nobody did anything about it. That was about to change! You know that Jesus did something about it; something he knew would stir up the Roman Soldiers who did not hesitate to keep order -- especially at this time of Passover. He knew his gesture was tantamount to asking to be crucified. He did what needed doing. He cleaned out the Temple, he was arrested, and he was crucified.

What child is this? Nails and spear shall pierce him through. The cross he bore for me, for you. So, bring him incense, gold and myrrh! Come peasant, king to him; Let loving hearts enthrone him. This babe, the Son of Mary.

How practical was his teaching? Mahatmas Gandhi brought down the British Empire without firing a shot. His method was based on the teachings of Jesus. Martin Luther King’s “Civil Disobedience and Non-Violent Resistance” was based on the life and teachings of Jesus. And our own UU “Principles and Practices” are well within the Imitation of Jesus. Today is Christmas Eve, and we joyfully celebrate the birth of a child who grew up to be the man ever to walk the earth; a man who dared to dream the Impossible Dream:

To dream the impossible dream
To fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go

To right the unrightable wrong
To love pure and chaste from afar
To try when your arms are too weary
To reach the unreachable star

This is my quest
To follow that star
No matter how hopeless
No matter how far

To fight for the right
Without question or pause
To be willing to march into Hell
For a heavenly cause

And I know, if I'll only be true
To this glorious quest
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm
When I'm laid to my rest

And the world will be better for this
That one man, scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage
To reach the unreachable star

Merry, Merry Christmas!