



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

SETTING HIS FACE TO JERUSALEM

March is Lent month. Well, not all of Lent is in March. Usually Lent begins in February, and often it runs into April. But, for the most part, most of Lent runs through most of March—as it has done since this sacred forty-day season of preparation for Jesus’ passion and resurrection began to take shape in the early centuries of our Christian faith.

Advent/Christmas and *Lent/Holy Week* serve as two great focal points in the liturgical calendar. The former season celebrates the beginning of Jesus’ earthly life; the latter, the end of his sojourn among us. Both seasons unfold over roughly the same number in days; both evoke contemplation; the stories giving rise to both involve life-threatening circumstances; both narratives feature angelic proclamations; and both end in miracles. Moreover, both seasons have been altered (and not necessarily for the better) through the addition of a sneaky mythical character who deposits gifts for children while they are sleeping (Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny).

In a contest for people’s hearts (and especially in the Protestant world), Advent wins hands-down. After all, most folks prefer to focus on Jesus’ birth, not his death. We like that cuddly babe in the manger, all of those “lowing” cows and soft, fuzzy sheep, the wise men bearing exotic gifts, and of course the great angelic choruses. A birth suggests promise and hope, while death is anything but.... Betrayal, pain, suffering, death—these are things we try to avoid like the plague, even though they keep coming at us both in our personal lives and in news reports from far-flung places on our troubled globe.

The earliest Christians weren’t preoccupied with such avoidance. Interestingly, they gave priority to Jesus’ ending rather than to his beginning. Take a look again at your Bible. There are four Gospels—four stories about Jesus of Nazareth. Only two of the four—*just two*—narrate Jesus’ birth (Luke and Matthew). But all four devote many pages to his death.

The Gospel of **Mark**, for example, has been described as “a passion narrative with an extended introduction.” The passion story begins in ch. 11 and runs through ch. 15. Nearly one-third of that Gospel is about Jesus’ death.

In **John’s** Gospel, the first explicit mention of Jesus’ death is found as early as ch. 2 (v. 22), with clear references to his death popping up throughout the rest of the Gospel. Here the passion story itself begins in ch. 13, and runs to the end of ch. 19. Once again, that’s about one-third of the entire Gospel.

Before the reader even gets half way into **Luke’s** Gospel, the narrator says:

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9.51 NRSV)

The rest of Jesus’ public ministry unfolds as Jesus moves inexorably towards his appointment with death in the Holy City.

Clearly, the early Christians had a much higher regard for Jesus’ suffering and death that many of us do today. But why?

I suggest that if you listen carefully to the Scripture lessons for this month, if you think about the words of the hymns you are singing, and if you are attentive to the sermons of your pastor, then you might very well discover the answer to this all-important faith question. You might also come to recognize the fact that in the Western World, at least, our collective history is much more shaped by Jesus’ death than his birth.

A few weeks ago a pastor friend of mine shared in a sermon a fascinating Advent story that comes from a town in Australia. Apparently, over the years it had become something of a fad to steal Baby Jesus out of the crèches placed on the front lawns of the community’s churches. The janitor of one congregation became so fed up with the aggravating petty larceny that he developed a plan to guarantee his church’s Jesus could not be pilfered. As parishioners came to worship the next Sunday morning, they were at first relieved to see their Baby Jesus still resting safely in his manger. But then, as they drew near to the crèche, they gasped as they saw the reason why: *the janitor had pain-stakingly (pun intended) nailed the Holy Child to the crib!*

I’ll admit that, aesthetically, this was a pretty dumb thing to do. But theologically, it speaks volumes, doesn’t it?

In the shadow of the cross,
Toby Holleman, Associate Conference Minister

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