

Challenging Empire

Wayne Waibel – 12/31/2023

Aside from His visit to the temple at the age of twelve, Luke chapter two, verse forty stands as the singular account of the life of Christ from the time of His birth to the inauguration of His public ministry thirty years later. “And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.”

I may not remember what I had for breakfast yesterday, but I do recall a good deal of what transpired between my birth and the tender age of thirty. I wonder if the events of Christ’s life before His divine mission mirrored ours in some respects. And if so, perhaps in an extremely limited sense – ours mirrored His.

While we may not have been entirely cognizant of our inner mission – to some degree we grew in spirit, gained wisdom, and found favor with God. So began the struggle to be in the world without being conformed to it. And as Americans, the extraordinary paradox of challenging empire while relying upon the comfort it affords.

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Righteousness is not something inherent to humanity, but something granted by the grace of God in Christ. Whenever you feel unworthy of that grace, remember Jacob impersonating his brother Esau. He essentially coerced his brother's birthright and divine blessing.

Did not matter a wit. An entire nation was born despite the human elements of deception and trickery. God will always have the last word, and to be frank, none of us are worthy of His grace.

With our inability to be still and know that God is God, we miss God. We fall, and from that lowest point – we rise. We may just fall, but if we rise, we fall and then rise. That's how it works for us as Christians. That is what Simeon was talking about in his blessing to the parents of Jesus.

With the world it's rise and fall. The rise and fall of the Third Reich; the rise and fall of the Roman empire – the Ottoman empire. Pick an empire – it rose – then fell. Some will remember a time when the sun never set on the British empire, so vast was the Commonwealth. But that's the world.

With Christ it's always fall – then rise. To be in sync with Christ is to be out of sync with the world. There is such an elegance in that truth. We must first fall in order to rise. Because rising is the point of the fall.

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God's capacity to save transcends our capacity to turn away. He proves it again and again. From the time of Cain and Abel – to Noah – to Moses – to the birth of Christ. God consistently and deliberately bestows upon humankind a grace that defies all human logic. The promise of new beginnings is integral to God's plan.

The salvation of the world signaled through the birth of Jesus Christ reorients our primal focus. We turn from a people built on optimism, which is based on the possibilities of things as they have come to be – to a community built on hope, which is based on the possibilities of God - irrespective of how things are.

Those who were present with Simeon and Anna that day in the temple were undoubtedly confused by the prophetic witness. For them, the only context was Torah and the expectation of a Messiah. And to the mind of a first century Jew under Imperial occupation – that expectation would have been for a warrior king.

All Christ cared about was the righteousness of a nation, not its conquests. His courage far outflanked any warrior king of any generation in any span of history.

We tend to forget the extraordinary impact of the Son of Man in proclaiming truth to power. His doing so ushered in the fall of Empire, that the kingdom of heaven could rise.

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Inside every heart visions speak. Coupled with righteous imagination, those visions can yield fairly remarkable results. We're not always precisely aware of the consequences of our actions, but those efforts extended through diligent intention contribute mightily to the falling and the rising.

Our efforts then to remain in sync with Christ and the falling and the rising, put us on a path contrary to the world in which we live and move and have our being – or does it?

Are we intimately involved with the current political broiling that seems to be headed toward a reckoning of untold proportions, or are we occupied with our fellow citizens' struggles to overcome the inequities of empire? In the context of the capitalism of our generation, it is hard to accept the idea of being blessed, but not prosperous.

Do we bemoan the dreadful season of Vikings football or celebrate the fact that there are actually live sporting events that manage to thrill and entertain us despite our personal allegiances? Did we not just manage to find peace on earth and good will toward men despite the dire circumstances brought on by social unrest?

To choose the ebb and flow of the righteous does not negate the overwhelming need of humankind for salvation. And to be engaged in that struggle does not require of us a conformity to the world. In fact, what the world needs now is a savior which is Christ the Lord. Who's to say that the rise of the kingdom of God is not precipitated by the fall of worldly woes?

On this first Sunday after Christmas when all of the trappings of modernity begin to subside and church attendance is usually the lowest of any Sunday in the year, we would do well to remember how Almighty God chose to come into the world.

Not with imperial force and majestic fanfare, but with a tiny little baby – helpless and utterly dependent upon peasant parents. This is how our God comes to us. This is why we are to line up with Him as fellow travelers on the path to eclipsing empire. Amen.