

In This Night the Stars Left Their Habitual Places

“And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.” Imagine. This was how the stage was set for a baby to be born in a city not his own, his parents separated from family and friends—only strangers and burdened beasts to accompany them. Strange, this juxtaposition of the decree of Caesar against the nativity. Imagine Augustus in his palace—the hub of his power—feeling a little restless, feeling dissatisfied, feeling the need for *more*. And then cut, across the seas, to distant shores and beyond, to a young couple sleeping in a *barn* in a large city and the young woman going into labor.

As beautiful and as poignant as are the nativity scenes I see, whether on brightly lit lawns or softly illuminated window sills, the beauty of the nativity, even the beauty of the donkey, the sheep, the cow, the bed of straw, the humble shepherds in the periphery, as beautiful as this scene is, I forget, I simply forget, the decree that brought Joseph and Mary to that place.

“All the world should be taxed,” said Caesar Augustus, and it was so.

And so it so often remains. The world is taxed, the world is burdened, by the decrees of those who rule from their palaces, their privileges, their power. You know them. Call them nations’ leaders or CEOs, call them military dictators or media moguls, call them hierarchy or oligarchy, they are too often running the show. So, what to do? What do we do for ourselves, our families, our friends, our children, all born into this world? Do we simply let things be, hope that change will maybe magically arrive under our Christmas trees? Or do we help move things from their “habitual places,” speak like lions with deliberation, “This is the end revolution,” and so with our children, learn to live differently? Might that not be the message of the nativity?

To put it another way, wasn’t Mary’s giving birth to Jesus while in Bethlehem with Joseph to pay taxes, wasn’t that the beginning of a sort of labor movement, a movement to care for and tend to the masses? As a young boy, born of his mother’s labor, Jesus himself labored so much to learn, his parents lost

him for three days in Jerusalem, and they “found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions. And all heard him and were astonished at his understanding and answers.” And he went back home to Nazareth with his parents, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature...”

Then, when he was an adult, Jesus took his learnings and began to reach out to the most taxed, most burdened, of his world. He began to teach, and to heal and, when ears (and minds and hearts) were clogged, he didn't hesitate to upheave whole tables, to remind money changers what temples are really meant for. Jesus, a child born in a manger, was leading his people out from underneath the powers that be. Jesus was moving the world out from underneath the emperor's decree.

The Book of Isaiah prophesied, “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” Christians believe the child of that prophecy is Jesus Christ, and I do as well. But I also believe Unitarian Sophia Lyon Fahs when she writes, as we heard last week, “For so the

children come and so they have been coming.... No wisemen see a star to show where to find the babe that will save humankind. Yet each night a child is born is a holy night.” And so I believe that Martin Luther King, Jr., was also the child of Isaiah’s prophecy, when he struggled to make come true his dream, “that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.” I believe that in an entirely different corner of the earth, Tenzin Gyatso, who was proclaimed the 14th Dali Lama at the age of *two*, was and is the child who shall lead. *All* the people I talked of with the children during Time for All Ages are, in their own right, “the child who shall lead,” and so all the children here, in your own right, also have the right to be the child who shall lead.

In order for that to happen, I don’t recommend, parents, you making a trip to Bethlehem without first making reservations at an inn, especially if one of you is “great with child.” Nor do I recommend you letting your twelve-year old ditch you in Jerusalem for three days so he can study under

strangers. But I do recommend this. Teach well, love well, live well. As you celebrate Christmas Eve, live as if each night a child is born is a holy night. As you celebrate Christmas morning, live as if each day is a day of communion, of sharing. Live as if all the world should share the joy as well as the burden. So may it be that all the world be the child who shall lead.

Amen