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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Luke 2: 15-16; Galatians 5: 13-23

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Let Us Go Now to Bethlehem:

Nativity and the Constraints of Freedom

I was awoken in the middle of the night by a hymn this past week.  I had a lot on my mind, and some uncertainty about how to say what I wished to say this morning.  Maybe it was my unconscious, or maybe it was the whisper of some holy spirit, but somewhere around 4 AM, I found myself awake, with O Little Town of Bethlehem running through my mind.  When I awoke once again a few hours later, the hymn was still going, together with a clarity about how to proceed this morning.  It is, ultimately, Bethlehem that I wish to speak about today.

It is Bethlehem, but it is also the matter of freedom that I wish to take up - the contradictions and paradoxes of freedom, the use and abuse of that word freedom, and maybe its lingering promise as well.  Ever since the election, but much longer than that too, I have been both stirred and troubled by that word.  I have been propelled and compelled by that word over the years, but of late, I have begun to suspect that it harbors a trap within it, poised to spring shut the closer I, the closer we, draw near to it.  And I have begun to observe how, quite paradoxically, a vision of freedom has fueled the rise of far right movements across the globe.  And so I shall speak today of Bethlehem, but I shall do so in order to get at the chastening form of freedom suggested by that symbol, by that little town toward which we move.

To begin, though, I must say a word about the ways I have wrestled with that word, freedom, over the years.  You already know much about my story - I’ve shared it in various forms this autumn.  I grew up among conservative evangelicals, and there was much that I appreciated about that world.  I felt loved.  I felt nurtured.  I felt grounded in a reality larger than myself.  But I also felt ever more confined intellectually, spiritually, and morally in that environment.  I often experienced that world as one obsessed with prohibition.  There were prohibitions on sex and sexuality, of course, but also on a lot of other things too: listening to rock and roll music, dancing, tobacco, alcohol, suggestive films, imaginative books, and above all, certain ideas.

(A parenthesis: I’m conscious as I say all this that my parents are sitting up in the choir loft right now, probably burrowing down in their seats, wondering what the hell their son is going to say next up here!  I think I speak for them and for me when I say that we all, little by little, migrated out of that world, where, thankfully, the Presbyterians and now the UCC have given us a home.  We, and others like us, needed people like you, and churches like this one, to receive us when the time was right, so thank you for that!)

Back to the story.  This culture of general prohibition I’m describing rankled most at the level of ideas for me.  I recall times in high school, and later in college and even after, when I felt positively cornered by some people, usually male, usually older than me, who used the Bible, and theology, and a kind of hyperrationalism to put me in my place, to tell me what was what, and to shut down argument and thought.  It often frustrated and angered me.  To this day, I bristle when I sense those forms of authority being used against me, or against others.  It’s why I find the Christian right, and the far right politics nurtured by the Christian right, so obnoxious, and frankly, so grotesque.  It’s a system of patriarchal control that I’ve been fleeing my entire adult life.

In divinity school and graduate school, I devoured books and essays having to do with freedom in the Christian tradition - Luther, Augustine, Barth, Kierkegaard.  I’m not sure I always read them well, because it was ultimately a negative freedom that I was searching for.  It was freedom *from* all those prohibitions that I was searching for.  It was freedom *from* all those corners I found myself trapped in, freedom *from* expectations about how to think, talk, dress, behave.  I wanted to be free of all that hyperrationalist logic, and I wanted to be free of the men who thought in such ways.  Perhaps most of all, I wanted freedom from their God, who surveyed the every move of human beings, watching, controlling, finding ways to keep people in their place - letting them know what was what.

I don’t disavow any part of that quest.  I still desire those freedoms.  And I think in many ways I found what I was looking for.  But in time, it also became clear to me that what I was after fit into a wider American pattern of what we can call the quest for negative freedom.  Negative freedom is about the removal of constraint and limitation.  It’s a freedom based on the logic of subtraction, or perhaps the line of flight - unburdening oneself of all imposed or perceived limitations.  It’s a pattern of thought in U.S. culture that transcends political orientation.  Versions of it thrive on both the left and the right.  From the left, brass bands in New Orleans sing “Do Whatcha Wanna.”  From the right, the Gadsden flags in all those yards says “Don’t Tread on Me.”  (I saw a brilliant response to those flags recently.  It said, “Nobody’s trying to tread on you, Sweetie.”)  But in essence, that’s what my version of freedom wound up looking like: the negative freedom of subtraction and removal.  Don’t tread on me.

But negative freedom works a little bit the way peeling an onion works.  You can strip layer upon layer of what seem to be imposed limitations, until you’re left with nothing at all.

Say for example you think that religion is oppressive, as I once felt it to be.  So you quit going to church, or to synagogue or to the mosque.  You remove all traces of religion from your life.  You might then go on to conclude that other things are hindering you: the American system of governance is terribly flawed, for example, and so you might then align yourself with those seeking to dismantle that government.  You might also move to a remote place where you won’t be bothered by the bureaucratic hassles of civic life.  You might go farther still, sensing that Western culture is irreparably damaged, or that the English language is the vocabulary of Empire, or that taxes, or gender constructs, or the patriarchal family, or your spouse, or your children, or your neighbors, or your boss, or vaccines, or affirmative action, or the law more generally - you might decide that any one of these is hindering your true expression of being, your freedom.  And so strip it all away, layer by layer.  But what then remains?  Eventually, just the empty shell of the self, or of the body.  But even a body is, finally, a confinement.  Even that is a limitation - it is maybe the greatest hindrance of all to freedom, as anyone who has ever been ill, or has gotten old, can tell you.  You can chase that freedom all the way to the grave.  That’s why negative freedom, in its purest form, is a desire for death.  It is what Freud called the death drive in action.

And is that not precisely where we have landed as Americans?  The removal of all constraints, even unto death?  During Covid, it manifested as the wish to remove mask and vaccine mandates, even if it risked the death of one’s neighbors, or oneself.  I knew someone who preferred to risk death rather than abide by the limitations of those mandates.  He got his wish.  It manifests in the absence of limitations around weapons, even if the lives of school children, or anyone in a public space, is put at risk.  It manifests in the removal of constraint around the burning of fossil fuels, even if the planet burns, or floods.  It manifests in the removal of constraint around speech known to cause harm, or the removal of constraint around abusive and toxic behaviors, even if it means the absolute violation of another.  It manifests in the freedom to be proud and ignorant, constructing a superficial history that removes whole peoples and their suffering from the past.  What we are witnessing today in the United States is an expression of the death drive as manifested in the pursuit of negative freedom.  And it is killing us.

So look, negative freedom has a rightful place.  It allowed Syrians to remove Assad from power.  It allows scared women to flee abusive partners.  It fuels emancipatory movements everywhere around the world.  We need to retain some version of negative freedom.  I’ve needed it in my own life.

But right now we need something far different.  Borrowing from the writer Maggie Nelson, I would characterize this need as the freedom found in constraint, and the freedom found in care.  These are freedoms that bind, rather than loose, freedoms that enmesh rather than separating and scattering.  In contrast to the negative freedom of the death drive, this is a freedom of life, and I think for us, it is typified most fully in the scene of Bethlehem.

Consider the most basic insight of the Christian faith, the words forming the prologue of John’s Gospel: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.  The Word, here, represents a freedom without constraint.  The Word represents the spaceless and timeless infinity of God, unlimited, unbounded, unfettered.  The Word represents the absence of all human limitation.  The Word is the not so secret dream of all those who wish to live as untethered and unconstrained beings in the world.

But flesh…flesh is the very opposite of that abstract and unfettered freedom.  Flesh means that you’re bound to a particular time and place.  Flesh means having bodily needs that do constrain you.  Flesh means having a finite mind, such that you’re forced to work out what you actually think and believe, and what you don’t.  Flesh means that you are rendered vulnerable to hurt, to wounds, to ruin.  Flesh means being bound together with those who are also so bound, bundled by need, constraint, and limitation.

The story of Christmas is about God moving from a negative or an abstract freedom, to a freedom conditioned by care and vulnerability.

That’s precisely what we see demonstrated in the painting on the cover of our bulletins, an 1890 image from a German painter, Fritz von Uhde.  This is a couple, Mary and Joseph, who in no way accord with easy notions of freedom.  They are heavy laden with burdens.  They look tired and weary.  And yet see how the two figures lean into one another.  See the plodding footsteps of Mary, carrying all the weight of divinity within her.  See how Joseph bends to support her, that she not stumble or fall.  Is that not one of the most powerful images of freedom available to people of faith, a freedom demonstrated in responsibility and care toward others?  And is the entire Christmas narrative not about God doing just that for the sake of you, and of me - freely accepting the burden of care for your sake and for mine, that we might learn to support one another in our common need?

The Apostle Paul expands on this paradoxical freedom in his letter to the Galatians when he talks about the freedom found in God.  “God brings gifts into our lives,” he says, “much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard - things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity.  We develop a willingness to stick with things,” Paul writes, as well as “a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people.  We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life…”

Reading those characteristics, and considering the journey toward Bethlehem we are considering this morning, it is worth recalling Mazin Qumsiyeh’s presence with us last week.  And it’s worth recalling his own journey to Bethlehem.  Mazin is a renowned biologist.  He was a professor at Duke and at Yale.  He has joint citizenship, with the U.S. and with Palestine.  He could live anywhere.  What he chose was to go back to Palestine, freely choosing to live under a military occupation that becomes more lethal by the day.  What he chose was to live in solidarity with his people, even though it has meant harassment, arrest, cracked ribs, and proximity to sorrow.  And he remains there, even under immense pressure.  Why does he do it?  You heard him last week: because of his love, because of his commitment - for his people, for Palestinian people, but also for the Israelis that he hopes to change.  Mazin is subject to some terrible constraints, but he is one of the freest individuals I have ever known.

Where does this Bethlehem story leave us, we who are struggling against destructive forms of freedom?  More to the point, where does it leave a progressive church such as ours, struggling against rigid forms of religion that seek to keep us, and a lot of other people besides us, firmly in their place?  How do we navigate the tensions of freedom, such that we don’t suffocate from coerced obligation, on one hand, and the nihilistic absence of all restraint on the other?

The Yale historian Timothy Snyder argues that freedom, in the positive sense, is knowing what we value, and bringing it to life.  It’s about nativity.  In that spirit, here are a few ways that we might enact our freedom in the months and years to come.

First, now is the time to clarify our values, to say what it is that we believe to be true about the world, and about ourselves.  To that end, I’ve had our church staff, as well as many of our Boards, begin a close reading of the South African Kairos Document.  But I’d like to invite all of you to join in that process.  Beginning in the new year, on Thursday, January 16th, those who can will gather in the Hoag Parlor at noon to begin our study.  To stand in a kairos moment means, in the words of the Hebrew Bible, choosing this day whom we will serve.  It means standing in one place and not another.  It entails the realization that we as a church simply cannot be all things to all people.  We must have a point of view, one that is never fully fixed and is always subject to revision, but a point of view all the same.  As in the Christmas narrative, we must risk placing ourselves somewhere.  The Kairos Document has some strong suggestions about where we might be placed, and how we might be aligned.

Second, this freedom of care and constraint hints that now is the time to renew the bonds of care among ourselves.  In the new year, my hope is that we might launch small groups, organized around guided conversations.  Several in our midst have been learning how to host such groups.  My desire is that they will strengthen our bonds of affection, reducing whatever loneliness or isolation some of us might feel, while also helping us all to hear what’s happening in the lives of those around us.  I hope it might also help us to begin imagining some of the needs that we’re learning about as a result of meetings held with other community leaders along the Shoreline.  As in the story of Bethlehem, we risk the limitations and joys discovered in being bound up within an ethic of care.

Third, in this new era, we cannot and must not neglect our international partnerships.  We’re entering what promises to be an era of unprecedented American isolationism, and as a church, we must challenge ourselves to remain connected to those near to us, but to people far from us too.  And we must ask: how far does our enmeshment with others extend?  To whom are we bound?  Only to those who carry the same passport?  Only to those who speak the same language?  Or is our freedom more binding and more comprehensive than that?  The past month has made it very tempting to withdraw into ourselves, into our own cocoons.  But I don’t think we can overestimate how powerful it is to build and to maintain relationships with those in other parts of the world, generating what I hope are mutual relations of goodwill.  We’ll have opportunities to do that in Cuba and hopefully in Green Grass in the coming year.  If we simply turn inward, we lose the thread of the Gospel itself.  As in the story of a God becoming flesh, we show up in unexpected places, places that sometimes disorient us for a while.  But it is in that disorientation that we attain a wider understanding of the responsibilities we bear toward our fellow human beings.

We practice the freedom of care and constraint in a thousand other ways too - parents do it with their children, sometimes adult children do it with their parents, spouses do it for one another when they get ill, and friends do it for one another when one begins to struggle.  In those and other ways, we learn how to negotiate, suffer, and dance our enmeshment - our freedom - with one another.

It’s all there in the Bethlehem story.  It’s all there in the Word becoming flesh, in the care and constraint of individuals, each bearing a trace of Divinity, making their way along a muddy path.  We need to recall that freedom in America right now.  We need to relearn what it means to practice it.  Let us go, then, to Bethlehem.