

# God's Politics

sermon digest

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Isaiah 11:1-11; Luke 1:39-56

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Last Sunday, our Jewish friends ended the eight-day celebration of Hanukkah. Following the ancient Jewish calendar, Hanukkah usually falls during the four Sundays of Advent, anticipating Christmas. While we light our four Advent candles, our Jewish friends light eight Hanukkah candles on their Menorah. When our children were small, we moved to a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, populated with about as many Jews as Christians. In the Chesterfield Elementary School our children learned Hanukkah songs to sing along with "Jingle Bells" and "Rudolph" for the annual holiday program for parents. In respect for one another and the U.S. Constitution, both Christmas and Hanukkah were recognized in the schools for their cultural, secular value, leaving to the churches and synagogues responsibility for the religious education of the children. It was then that I began to connect the dots between Christmas and Hanukkah. The two major religious celebrations usually fall in same month, December, but they also confront a very similar political situation in Jewish history.

Three centuries before Christ, the Jews lost their independence to the invading armies of Alexander the Great and became a political pawn of competing empires. The Seleucid King Antiochus Epiphanes invaded Jerusalem in 175 BCE and denounced the Jewish religion. Among other things, he criminalized the practice of circumcision, placed a statue of Zeus in the Temple, and had a pig sacrificed on the Temple altar, an act remembered in Mark 13:14 as the "desolating sacrilege." A rural priest Mattathias was infuriated by the new regime; he attacked and killed a compromising Jew as he approached the altar to offer a sacrifice to a pagan deity in the Temple. Mattathias and his five sons took refuge in the mountains, where the elder priest soon died. Judas, the elder son also known as "the hammer" (Maccabeas), led a revolution against the occupying army of Antiochus Epiphanes and won the right for Jews to practice their religion. Hanukkah, also known as the feast of lights or feast of dedication, celebrates the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 165 BCE at the end of the Maccabean revolution. The historical context of Hanukkah concerned political oppression and identified God with the poor and oppressed. Not only did Jesus participate in the rites of Hanukkah (John 10) in his ministry, the stories of his birth sound many of the same notes in a similar political context.

**Advent is rooted in revolution.** Today we read Mary's song in celebration of her pregnancy, "The Magnificat." But the song of Mary is hardly the sweet lullaby we might expect from a girl expecting her first child. It is a revolutionary message associating the birth of a Jewish savior who will bring a revolution of economic and social justice. Although the facts are debatable, Luke locates the birth of Jesus in a specifically political context. The Emperor is Augustus. Quirinius is governor of Syria. The immediate occasion of his birth is the registration of the population for tax purposes. In addition, Matthew locates the holy family in Herod's province and describes a visitation from Eastern diplomats, a child destined to be King of the Jews, a direct threat to the insane monarch. Matthew charges Herod with the slaughter of babies, tyranny Jews had known under Antiochus Epiphanes.

Christian minister Jim Wallis of Sojourners published *God's Politics* in 2005 challenging politicians to listen to the prophetic message of the Bible that calls government to defend the poor and the innocent. Wallis is certain that God does not belong to any political party and argues that God is not the private possession of any person or class, especially not the rich and powerful. His subtitle is "Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It." The biblical God is concerned with the public good. The eighth century Prophets of God challenged every public policy that takes from the poor to feed the rich, that allocates resources away from human need in order to wage unjust wars. Wallis cited the song of Mary as one illustration of his point (p. 213): "Mary did not sound like a religious service provider with a faith-based federal grant, but instead like a social revolutionary." Her prayer of hope for the child seemed to ignore the usual focus on sweet innocence. She hoped for a social revolution that would bring down the powerful from their thrones to lift up the lowly and to feed the hungry, what Wallis calls "God's Politics." Furthermore, Raymond Brown (*The Birth of the Messiah*) believes that the canticles in Luke came from a community of Jewish Christians identified with the Jewish Anawim, "poor ones." The songs of Mary and Zechariah may have come from battle hymns sung before and after fighting during the Maccabean revolution. The message of social justice, the theme of the songs, were probably sung for 160 years before Christ by people longing for the justice associated with the rule of God, the Kingdom of God, which happened to be the primary message of Jesus in the Gospels.

**God cares about people.** God is political in the essential meaning of the term. The word *politics*

addresses the concerns of people, citizens of a *polis*, a city or community. John's Gospel declares that sending the Son was in direct response to God's love for the *cosmos*, the world as the habitation of people made in the divine image. While our religion and the central purpose of our gathering centers in the worship of God, the message of the Bible reveals a God whose central concern is the welfare of the people. Worship and human justice are certainly complementary, but we need to be aware that our religion does not ignore human need. Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God and demonstrating God's rule by feeding the multitude, healing the sick, and raising the dead. We may be surprised to discover that God is not self-centered so much as world-centered, and God calls us to a faith that centers not in our own authority and power but in the empowerment of the lowest and the neediest of our brothers and sisters.

Jürgen Moltmann called Jesus the "disarming child," the child of Isaiah on whose shoulders the government shall rest and of whose kingdom shall be peace rooted in justice and righteousness for evermore—a political Messiah! But both the disciples and the enemies of Jesus got it wrong. They commonly expected Messiah to come like Judas Maccabeas to raise an army, overthrow Caesar, and triumph over pagan tyranny by establishing Jewish rule in the Roman seat of government. They got it wrong the same way Christians got it wrong in the age of Constantine. God's politics has no interest in exchanging one tyranny for another. Invariably, when religion, any religion—even our religion—gets obsessed with power over others and attempts to hold the reins of government it becomes the very center of injustice addressed in Mary's song. Religion that loses its concern for human need becomes the very thing that Christ came to correct.

Five years ago, we attended lectures by John Dominic Crossan shortly after he released his book *God & Empire*. I knew of Crossan as one of the original scholars of the Jesus Seminar devoted to the study of the Gospels and the search to understand the historical Jesus. Crossan began his Christian journey as an Irish Catholic monk, but in the pursuit of historical truth he became a world-class biblical scholar. I was impressed with his knowledge of the historical context surrounding our Bible. His book views the Gospel message about Jesus as a direct confrontation with the role of government and the authority of Augustus Caesar, which he sees as the significance of the first sentence of the Christmas story: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." Augustus was named on his coins as "a son of deity" and claimed descent from the goddess Aphrodite-Venus and the Trojan hero Anchises. Augustus was also called savior and prince of peace, and his reign was to know no end. Crossan put the Gospel of Jesus up beside the picture of Augustus and demonstrated the global choice—Jesus or Augustus. Christians made a political statement: we choose to follow Lord Jesus rather than Lord Augustus. Crossan imagines Mary and perhaps Joseph taking Jesus to the top of a hill outside of Nazareth to tell of the year that he was born, about 4 BCE. He learned of the slaughter of innocent citizens and even babies by the Roman armies and the need of a new political order.

***We need to get political.*** You know my strong opposition to the establishment of religion in secular government and my strong support of the First Amendment to the Constitution. Invariably we tend to identify being political with a party line or gaining control of the secular government. Frankly, the only thing that stands between us and the kind of tyranny known by early Christians and Jews is for the people of God to be political, to be concerned with public policy that affects the life and death of the ordinary people of this world. Like Jesus, we need to listen to the Prophets: "Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 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." The purpose and will of our God is for peace on earth and the welfare of the weakest and poorest of God's children on the earth. God's concern is without national boundaries; it is global. Jesus loves the little children of the world. If we get the message right, Christians will be citizens of our place in history concerned with matters of government, public policy, issues of justice.

I recall that message from James Wood, a Christianity professor at Baylor. It was the era of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. He noted one day in class that the Soviet Union allowed churches to worship God but would not allow them to speak to current issues. They were allowed to be religious but not political. Wood was devoted to separation of church and state and had no interest in establishing Christian control of government, ours or theirs; but he acknowledged that we could not follow Christ without speaking the Good News of Christ in the public, political arena. All human concerns tend to get translated into public policy and government order. We have to be involved.