

CHRISTMAS EVE 2017

I invite you now to settle back....and let this story find a home in your soul. Whatever is going round and round inside you right now....just let it be, for now. There's another wheel spinning right....now. The one that always **has** been.

Tonight

Tonight, it's taking the straw in this manger and spinning intogold. This moment is golden. Shining. The great spinner is at the wheel, spinning a yarn sturdy and warm and waiting to become....what will it become? This yarn we spin tonight? Will it lie on the floor here after we leave? Will we gather it up in some plastic bin labeled "Christmas" and put it away until next year? Or....will we take this yarn, gather it up into our very human selves andWill we take it home, out there with us, and make of it something beautiful?

The possibilities would make your head spin!

So let's begin.

I bet that in the car on the way here you were saying to each other

I hope she preaches on Marduk, Tiamat and the Babylonian creation myth.

Well lucky for you that's exactly what I'm going to do.

I hope it will become clear why I'm beginning that way as I go on, but for now I will just say that a huge part of Biblical history is this:

But first: I think we might all agree that it's been a hard year, on the world stage. Last year at this service we were all still kind of reeling from the US election and wondering what happened, and what was GOING to happen. There was a kind ofit felt like vertigo. I hope that doesn't seem like overstating things. And the only reason I mention that is thatyou know that feeling of vertigo, when something has happened in the world that you don't quite understand and it shakes you and makes you wonder about ...everything? Just hang on to thatbecause that's what happened to the people of Judah and Jerusalem almost 600 years before the common era.

In the year 587 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon attacked and demolished Judah and its capital Jerusalem. . Crushed it. Destroyed the temple, and dragged the people (those who were of any use to him) into captivity in Babylon, where they stayed for a couple of generations. They were traumatized, displaced, defeated. They had to rethink everything they had previously believed about God and about life. Remember the psalm By the rivers of Babylon? That's where that comes from.

So just keep that in mind for a moment. But picture this: there they are, living in a country not their own, in a country that had captured and tortured and destroyed them.

THE QUESTION BECOMES: How do you live when the society around you is against everything you believe, everything you are used to and value, everything you ARE? How do you live like that?

As you know, every culture, every religion, tells stories about creation. How we got here. Those stories aren't scientific treatises, never meant to be. They are stories that tell us basic things about ourselves and they affect...everything. So here's how the Babylonian story goes.

In the beginning, there were two gods: a mother and a father. Apsu, the father god, and Tiamat, the mother god. It's a long story but I'll cut to the chase here: They have children, little godlets. Some of them rebel against the parents and they kill their father. Tiamat the mother, pledges revenge.

Marduk, the youngest god, catches his mother Tiamat in a net. He kills her. He splits her body open length wise... He stretches out her corpse full-length, and out of her corpse, the world is born. And order is restored.

Merry Christmas!!

What does this have to do with anything? A LOT. JUST FOLLOW ME FOR A MINUTE OK?

In this myth, the gods are powerful, selfish, vengeful and controlling. The world is born out of an act of violence. Violence is at the heart of creation - Corollary? Violence and naked self interest.... is in our very DNA, our bones. It's how we were created.

This is the story that the Babylonians lived with and out of. This is the world into which the captives from Judah are taken. They hear that story, so very different from their own. They wonder if they'd been fools to believe that there was a God who cared for them, who protected them,....that there was a God at all....perhaps the Babylonians are right. The world IS made from and for violence and there's nothing we can do about that.

The implications are clear: human beings are created from the blood of a murdered god. Our very origin is violence. Killing is in our genes. Human beings are thus naturally incapable of peaceful, orderly coexistence. Order must continually be established, by violence if necessary, and life is a struggle to keep order, imposed from on high.

The Babylonian myth is far from finished. That story....called by other names now....that story is the dominant myth in our society today.

And you don't have to know Babylonian mythology to know this story. It's spun out for us everywhere.

Do you know Wile E Coyote? He and the road runner spin this out every single time they do a cartoon. They use violence against each other. Neither one of them ever learns anything, they keep repeating the same pattern of behaviour....over and over and over. Patterns of violence and us against them, me against you, patterns that go round and round and round with no change.

Life is just like that, the myth says. We learn to laugh at it and expect it, and repeat it in our public and private lives. We get into the rut, we spin our wheels and nothing ever changes and there is no one and nothing to make the wheel stop...to offer us a vision, an act, a word, of creative imagination to free us from the pattern; from the power of that myth.

Some call it The Myth of Redemptive Violence and it is the simplest, laziest, most exciting, uncomplicated way of understanding life that the world has ever known.

Into that Babylonian world, come the Jewish exiles. Their own world view of a God who is intimately involved in their lives, who cares for them and gives life to the world...that world view has been destroyed along with the Temple. They are frightened. They're angry. They're traumatized and confused. And YOU know, when people are ...all those things...they are vulnerable to anything and anyone who proposes to explain it or fix it.

Chaos wearies the mind and heart. And we search for answers. WHY? Why do bad things happen? We look for authoritarian saviours who will come and make it right. We turn to blame and simple answersor we turn to cynicism and withdrawal, into things that give us a sense of false transcendence, like success, or war, or religion that is separated from life.

Because we're scared and confused and we want easy answers....

And there is lineup of hucksters telling you what went wrong and how to fix it. And usually that involves profit for the huckster and blame on some imagined "other" ...but you're so scared you can't see that part. The Jews were in that place.

IF there is a God, they're thinking, then we've been wrong....God does not care, protect, sustain.....if there's a god at all. And, maybe the Babylonians are right. They're scared, and they're angry and when people are scared and angry, you can tell them anything that promises to make their world great again and they'll believe it.

And the Babylonian myth says – look it's us against them and you'd better look after yourself and whatever is wrong is THEIR fault and you'd better protect yourself, with violence if necessary, from them.

And into that world speaks a poet and a priest. And that poet priest preacher spins another story.

READ GENESIS 1

Can you feel the power of that?

This world, the poet says, is a good gift from a good God. You are not free to abandon yourselves to cynical despair that gives you an excuse to sit on your couch and eat avocado toast and you're not free, (well actually you are) to living as though compassion is an unrealistic dream. You are made for a purpose. Notice how many times it says OF ALL KINDS? You are good. **And so are those who are different from you and so are those who hold you captive. You're made from love and for love. All of you**

Another way is possible.

Centuries later the pattern had repeated itself, as patterns do, and this time it was the Romans. They were busy managing an empire and they did it pretty well. They gave quite a bit of leeway to those they conquered, as long as they obeyed Roman law and didn't upset the system. There they were, the Jews, conquered AGAIN, and this time, under the domination of the Empire whose emperor had supreme power and called himself Son of God and Prince of Peace and who kept that peace by absolute power and the violence it took to maintain it.

The same old story. Wile E and the road runner. Nobody had learned a thing. It would make your head spin.

And into THAT world, the poet/pastors called Matthew and Luke tell THIS story. It's about Jesus And it's about another way. About another vision. An alternate reality so close ...so close....you can feel its breath on the back of your neck.

You can react to horrible things by pulling the shades down and closing the borders and you can sit in a dark room stunned by what's happened to you

that's one way.

There is another. And this time God creates that way not by the spoken word

but by a living word...a tiny squirming word. A vulnerable, tender word. A word and a way.

Christmas? Christmas is the in- breaking of that other way. The story of the incarnation – God-With-Us Emmanuel....this story says – another way is possible. We are NOT at the mercy of the Empire's narrative. . The story that says this is the best of all possible worlds, we're doing the best we can, nothing else is possible.

That's wrong. It's simply wrong. The story that says that God if there is a God, is high and removed and judgemental and out to punish....

Into that world view comes this story

Where an unwed teenager sings a song so powerful that century after century it does bring down the mighty from their thrones and lift up those of low degree and scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

Where the Holy One, the Creator of the Universe, the Mystery that moves the sun and the stars...that one is known to us in human flesh

And not only human flesh but the flesh of an illegitimate child of a poor marginalized couple about to become refugees. You want to know the God of heaven it says? Look here.

Luke and Matthew say, to an Empire and Emperor drunk on power and enslaved to the violence and world view that maintains it....they say to the Emperor and his flunkies....you call yourself Son of God and Prince of Peace? I don't think so. We'll show you a son of God and a prince of peace. Right here. Right here.

A story where the glory of the Lord, the glory that had led the people through exodus and exile....the GLORY OF THE LORD appearing for the first time in centuries... appears where? All around a group of unclean seasonal workers on the edge of society....

A story where some of the first to acknowledge this child are religious leaders from a different religion and culture, an enemy country.....using the very tools that the Hebrew scriptures had once condemned as evil. Astrology.

This stuff is so good!

As the creation stories in both forms fly in the face of the Babylonian myth. So the birth stories challenge and upset the Empire's narrative. These texts insist on an undeniable compelling hope for human life. For ALL life. For the world They are radical, subversive, powerful and so misunderstood that it's criminal.

This story.. says

you are not bound, you are not frozen, you are not tangled in this pattern forever. There is another way. There is another way. This world can come home to itself and its true nature it's true purpose...and you can too. You're not stuck forever on this road that goes round and round and round where nothing changes

you are not stuck there.

There is a way. Another way. As new as the umbilical cord still attached to this baby....and as old as the voice of the creator who called it all into being by a creative loving spoken word.

There is a way out. There is another way. John the Baptist asks us to prepare it. Luke and Matthew ask us to walk it. This child asks us to live it. The astrologers will go home by that other way.

You can listen to this Christmas story tonight and count it as a sentimental seasonal indulgence

OR you can understand the power of the story to turn you and the world upside down, and then set us upright again heading for home

Your choice.

What's at stake? Possibly, probably, the world.