

Stealing the Baby

Jesus came with a sword to cut away illegitimate kings.

Some of this sermon was stolen from a sermon by Skye Jethani called “What Child is this who came not to bring peace” (www.preachingtoday.com)

Text: Matthew 10:1–39

Topic: What Jesus meant when he said he came not to bring peace, but a sword

Eph. 2:14-18

Back in 1999 there was a big story in Chicago about how the baby Jesus figure had been stolen from the nativity scene at Daley Plaza. Eventually the police recovered the baby at a bus station after an anonymous tip. After that they started securing the baby Jesus figure with a cord and a bolt and a padlock to the manger to prevent anybody from stealing it again. It didn't work, though, because in 2004 the same thing happened. This time it was a 19-year-old college student who was able to slip the baby out from underneath the cable. The police caught up with him after two days and they returned Jesus to the manger. The security measures were increased again. This time a team of people is now responsible for making sure that baby Jesus doesn't get stolen anymore from Daley Plaza. They're known as the God Squad, and they're very tightlipped about the security measures in place. The goal of these guys is to make sure that Jesus never leaves the manger again.

During this time of the year it's normal for us to think of Jesus as the sweet baby in the manger. Our songs are about him being tender and mild, how he lays down his sweet head and no crying does he make, and all these wonderful images of the divine child. That's appropriate at this time of year. But have we bolted our perception of Jesus down to the manger? We tend to imagine Jesus as an adult the same way we view him as a baby. As an adult we want to picture him as being a mild, sweet-natured, and gentle Savior, someone who talks softly, who's got a perfect complexion and a twinkle in his eye—pretty much a big, grown-up baby. We rarely think of him as being aggressive or belligerent or combative or in any way socially impolite or politically incorrect.

This Advent season we want to ask the question, ***What child is this?*** Do we really understand who it is that we worship and welcome at Christmas? To answer that question, we've got to let Jesus out of the manger...we've got to steal the baby!

I want to begin 2,700 years ago. The prophet Isaiah was writing 700 years before Jesus came, and he prophesies that when the Messiah comes, when this divine King is born, he will be the Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6-7

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor,^[d] Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David

for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!

If you know the Christmas story, you know that on the night Jesus was born there were shepherds out in their fields and the night sky was broken and shattered into a glorious light by angelic beings that filled the sky. They declared to the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" It's one of the most dominant themes of the Advent season and it's how people think of Jesus. It's on Christmas cards. You see the image everywhere: Peace on earth – good will to men. We like to think that Jesus came to establish peace over all the earth, to be an end to all evil, to eliminate all conflict and strife, to bring harmony to the nations and make the lives of all people everywhere comfortable, safe and secure. It sums up the popular Christmas conception of who Jesus was and why he came. But is that an accurate conception?

Isaiah 9:6 says Jesus would be the Prince of Peace and there can be no doubt that he is...that peace is "shalom" and the idea is that the Prince of Peace will bring peace between God and humanity (Romans 5:1-5 NIV). It refers to salvation. Shalom is living without conflict in safety, it means well being, health, prosperity and the wholeness that a person experiences when ones living and ones heart fall under the rule of their true king. Salvation is never separated from living. Living with the Prince of Shalom is to live in the favor of God and to be established in right living before God. And it does mean that the peace we know with God dominates our living with others making us peacemakers as Matthew 5:9 tells us. And that's what Jesus has done. Through his dieing on the cross we are brought into peace with God and we are able to live rightly before our God as our King and in peace with others.

In Matthew 10 Jesus says something that disrupts our Christmastime conceptions about who he is and why he came. The chapter begins with Jesus selecting his 12 disciples, and then in verse 5 he sends them out on a mission to proclaim the kingdom of God throughout the villages and towns of Israel. He gives them specific instructions—to raise the dead and heal the sick and proclaim the Good News. Then, in verse 17, 21 and 22 he tells them that as they do this, some will reject the message and they are going to be persecuted. That they are going to hated because of Jesus. Doesn't sound very peaceful.

Then in verse 34, Jesus says this: **"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."** What are we to make of that? What happened to our Prince of Peace? What happened to "peace on earth, good will toward men"? Jesus says he did not come to bring peace but a sword. This doesn't fit with our view of Jesus in the manger—the sweet, innocent, meek, and mild baby. This doesn't fit with our cultural view of Jesus the man, who has been made to be equally sweet and gentle. How do we reconcile this view with the fact that Jesus says he has come to bring a sword? What does he mean?

First off, he's not speaking literally. Jesus is not a literal sword swinging savior. He never does, at least not anywhere in the Gospels. **It is important to understand that there is no contradiction when the Prince of Peace, who IS Peace with God, brings a sword to do his work.** Jesus is not using the sword as an illustration of vengeance or violence.

Remember, this is also the Jesus who told us to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us. He modeled that for us as he hung upon the cross when he prayed to forgive those who were seeking to kill him at that very moment. This is also the Jesus who told Peter to put away his sword, because those who live by the sword shall die by the sword. Jesus is not advocating violence or war. That's not what this symbol means.

The key is in the word *peace*. Jesus says he has not come to bring peace. The word he uses here is different from shalom, Jesus uses the Greek word Eirene (ei-ray-ne), a word with nuanced meaning. The root is eiro which means to join together. Eirene has the idea of bringing all things together and has the connotation of doing so in peace. When Jesus says I did not come to bring peace he means he did not come bring the world together as it is.

"I have come not to bring peace, but a sword." *I did not come to bring all things together but to distinguish one thing from another.* This fits the context. The inevitable result of the coming of Jesus to into the world and into our lives is not initially peace but confrontation and conflict. There will be a conflict between the rulers of this world and God's rule, Jesus brings us into conflict with whatever occupies the place in our lives and in this world that belongs to God. I've come to bring a sword that will distinguish the Kingdom of God from the kingdoms of this world who claim rule over what belongs to God.

And we see him doing that even from the moment of his birth. When King Herod heard from the Magi that the Messiah, the King of Kings, had been born in Bethlehem, Herod was greatly disturbed, because even as a baby, Jesus was a threat to his kingdom and power so Herod tried to have this child killed.

Mary and Joseph brought Jesus as an infant to the temple to be dedicated, as was the custom, and while there an old man named Simeon recognized that this baby was God's deliverer. While he was holding the child he said to Mary and Joseph, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel".

What we learn from this passage this morning is: Our perception of Jesus during this season often needs adjusting from the peaceful infant in the manger to Son of God who came to bring a kingdom not of this world and not necessarily even friendly with this world. At Christmas we don't celebrate the birth of a passive Savior, a pushover Messiah, somebody who just came to make the whole world feel better. The Prince of Peace came with a sword to dethrone every illegitimate king and kingdom that makes claim over our souls. He has come to call all people to forgiveness from sin and back into peace with God, back into the kingdom of his Father, back where we are created to be...but in doing so he brings us into conflict with a sword that is aimed at bringing down all that has made claim over what belongs only to God.

Well, Recognizing what this is the easy part and that's where the easy part ends. The second part is the hard part. It's the part where we live within the peace with God and others that Jesus, the Prince of Peace, brings.

What is described in Matthew 10:35-36 is not a Christmas story. **“For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law - a man's enemies will be the members of his own household”**.

This does not fit a suburban, family-friendly view of Jesus—certainly not the view of Jesus we like at the holidays, which are supposed to be all about family, right? That's precisely the point. Jesus recognizes that in our estrangement from God we tend to put something else in God's rightful place in our lives, and sometimes we will exalt something that God has created as good and wonderful like family and allow it to have a place in our lives that God never intended.

It is difficult for us to think that the sword will turn even against family. In middle-eastern culture the family meant everything to a person's living. One found their community and their place in the world within the family context. It was very much the center and foundation for every person's life. It made everything in life hold together and move. To give it up or bring the family name into dishonor or disrepute was unthinkable. To give up one's family for God was asking everything...

We can broadly apply this same teaching in our lives today. Because of the fact that Jesus spoke to the most important, central, and foundational part of life to his listeners in the first century- the elements that made everything in life hold together and move - we apply it the same way today. We are confronted with this sword as we consider the place that our families, marriages, jobs, money, possessions, community status, hobbies, life style...whatever is it in our hearts and lives that have a place God never intended...it applies to ANYTHING we put ahead of God.

Jesus is not advocating that we go home and wreck families and marriages because we follow Jesus – this means that Jesus must be the center and foundation for the family and the marriage and when there are people, even within our families, that fight against this Kingdom reality it naturally creates conflict and confrontation and will even turn one against another.

The reason why this is threatening is because to be in proper relationship with God means taking something or someone else in our lives out of the place that belongs to God. Every one of us, knowingly or unknowingly, has at some time put someone or something in that place, on the throne that rightfully belongs to God alone. Jesus fights for it. Just as Herod was threatened by the birth of this rival king, every one of us will come against this sword and should be threatened by the birth of Christ.

After these radical statements about family, Jesus addresses something else we often put in the place that belongs to God alone, and that's ourselves. At verse 38-39, he continues: "And

anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Again, he's using a metaphor. This time it's a cross. A cross is a symbol of death, of execution. What he's saying here is that you must take up your cross. You must willingly sacrifice yourself, die to yourself, put aside your own desires, dreams, goals, and ambitions, and put Christ first, not yourself. Self-denial is not a popular message. But that's what Jesus says: "Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

I mentioned at the beginning that the baby Jesus figure has been stolen from Daley Plaza a number of times. That's indicative of our culture, isn't it? We want Jesus; but we don't want a sword or a cross. We want all the benefits of faith...assurance of peace and comfort and joy, but we don't want it really costs to live for the one who demands our hearts and lives if we are going to experience them fully.

We want a Christmas, an Immanuel...God with us...with no cost.

At the heart of Christianity and Christmas is a paradox...the sword that contends for our whole allegiance will also give us everlasting peace under the loving rule of the Prince of Peace himself. Jesus knew it would be a battle...He says that he who finds his life, who takes control over his life, will, in fact, lose his life. We may throw God a bone every once in a while, but ultimately Jesus says it's not going to work. It's just the opposite. It's the person who gives up her life, who surrenders themselves completely to God, who keeps none of their dreams or hopes or desires for themselves but gives it all, lays it down before God, it is this person who will find the true gift of Christmas. A King, a Kingdom and peace with the great creator.

Remember, he didn't come to bring peace; he came to bring a sword. Just as his birth was a threat to Herod, Jesus' presence is a threat to every illegitimate king in our lives, including ourselves. He has come to dethrone us so the King himself can reign over all.

During this season don't be fooled. Don't look at the manger and think only about this innocent, **helpless**, sweet baby, tender and **mild**, laying down his sweet head. Jesus is no such thing. He did not come to make the world feel better as it is, but to demand our allegiance.

We are left this morning staring down the long double edge of a sword with one thought...only a truly sovereign God could make such a claim over our lives and souls.