

Here we are, gathered on this first Sunday after Christmas Day—known in the church year as the First Sunday of Christmas or Christmastide, or even just Christmas I. We're still singing some Christmas carols...but for most of us our mindset has gone back to a distinctly post-Christmas normal sort of routine. (Well, as normal as can be during a pandemic). Christmas is over, it's almost New Year's eve, and time to start thinking ahead.

I ran across this story from Joe Roos, who was publisher of Sojourners magazine when he wrote it. He was returning to the magazine office on the day after Christmas, anticipating a productive day—probably because most of the staff was gone and he could work uninterrupted.

He writes:

“My mind was already in a distinctly post-Christmas modus operandi. My Christmas gifts had been put away the night before. The news on NPR that morning was back to its normal routine, and, on the other stations, regular pop music had replaced the Christmas carols that had been playing just 12 hours earlier. Christmas was over.

The 8:15 AM H-2 bus arrived right on time, a minor miracle of sorts if you know anything about adherence to bus schedules in DC. Since it was the day after Christmas, very few people were on the usually crowded bus. In fact, the bus was nearly empty, with the exception of some developmentally challenged people who ride the H-2 line on their way to jobs elsewhere in the city. A young woman and a couple of older women sat near the front while three younger men were seated toward the rear. They were busily and happily talking with each other. I listened to the conversations going on

between the front and back of the bus. The passengers were very excited and animated as they told each other about their Christmas experiences, what they had given each other, what gifts they had received, what they ate for Christmas dinner, and so on.

As the conversation died down, one of the young men in the back started to softly sing “Silent Night.” He had just finished the first verse when one of the women in the front turned to him and harshly scolded him, saying, “Shhhh! Shhhh! NO—No—stop singing that. That’s for Christmas. That was yesterday. It’s over with now.” I was somewhat reluctantly agreeing with her logic when the young man ever so gently, but firmly, replied, “No—no—that’s not true. It’s only just beginning. It’s only just beginning.”

Let us pause in prayer.

Holy God, you have called us to live in faith and freedom, but we live with tightness in our chest.

You have called us to move in a new direction, but we cling to the path we know.

You have called us to reach outward in love, but we draw inward for protection.

You have called us to live with abandon, in trust, but we live carefully, in fear.

God, forgive us.

You sent Jesus not to judge us, but to save us. You accept both our courage and our fears.

In the name of Christ, may we dare to accept the gift of a new beginning.

After all, ‘it’s only just beginning.’                      Amen.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Herod waited to hear from the magi, who had come from the East, following the star to Jesus. Herod has instructed them: “When you find the child, return to me and let me know...so that I may worship also. But the magi were prompted in a dream to not go back to Herod, but should return to their country by another route. Herod realized that he had been tricked! He was angry, and in his jealous rage he gave orders that all boys in Bethlehem and vicinity that were 2 years old and under were to be killed.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, instructing Joseph that Herod was planning to kill the child, and that they were to go to Egypt and stay there until receiving further instructions. Egypt, though under Roman control, was outside of Herod’s jurisdiction—and the child would be safe there. Herod went through with his diabolical plan, and the weeping of mothers was heard throughout Bethlehem.

But Herod died, and upon the death of Herod the angel of the Lord appeared again, and Joseph was instructed to take the child home, because the one who wanted to take the child’s life was dead. Joseph heard that Herod’s son was reigning in place of Herod, so he withdrew to Galilee and lived in a town called Nazareth.

Now, as far as the details and accuracy of this story line...there’s a lot of scholarly debate on that! But, the truth of this sacred story remains intact through the story theme. The Messiah was looked after, provided for, and placed in an

environment where he could be nurtured and grow, even in the midst of dangerous and violent circumstances.

Do we not yearn for the very same protective values for all of God's beloved?

A few years back I was attending a breakfast club meeting, and the speaker was Mel Duncan, who told us about the work of an international organization known as Nonviolent Peaceforce.

We were told that the last 10 years had been brutal for those caught in violent conflict and disaster. The people in need has nearly doubled and that over 65 million folks had fled their native land because of war and persecution the past year. It figures out (at that time)—to 34,000 refugees per day. Jesus was a refugee, for Joseph and his family were directed to life in a foreign land.

Here's what the organization says in their brochure about "How We Do It".

—We employ and train people to prevent, reduce, and stop violence through protective presence and accompaniment. Through building relationships. Through facilitating dialogue. Through monitoring ceasefire agreements.

We do not take sides in any conflict and work independently from any special interest group, political party, ideology, or religion. We are committed to the dignity, safety, and well-being of all people.

We believe nonviolence is the strongest and most effective force for achieving lasting peaceful settlement of conflicts. We do not engage or support actions that may result in harm or loss of life. We are guided by international human rights

and humanitarian laws and make it possible for local communities to work out solutions to their own problems. Our specially trained professionals are multi-national, 50% women, with over half from the host country itself. They are deeply immersed in the local community.

Jesus spoke of and lived a lifestyle of welcoming the stranger and including the outcast and the marginalized—even when he was criticized himself. As Christians, we believe and affirm that welcome, hospitality, and care for our neighbors is part and parcel of our way of following Jesus.

The tough questions are still among us. If Jesus were born today, to teen parents in American poverty, would he be better off now than he was 2,000 years ago??

How do we support efforts to make sure all mothers and fathers have adequate health care, food, education, clothing, and shelter? As faithful folks of means, do we have an obligation to the poor beyond just offering them words of assurance or words of blessing?

It's only just beginning...but maybe this is our moment in history that we've been working for our whole lives. To continue to recognize where people are burdened and not free, or not free to be themselves authentically. To continue to work, through love, to aid in their release? Where are the folks today who are held captive in so many different ways?

May we be encouraged...may we be centered on what really matters. It's only just beginning....only just beginning.

Thanks be to God!

