

A Strange Way To Save The World

I remember when my family was taking a trip across the country in my uncle Phil's white van which we had borrowed for the occasion. We would drive to various tourist sites and find a local KOA campground and set up there for a while. The van had four seats and a flat space at the back covered with foam that was kind of like a bed. While we were driving, my brothers and I would play or read in the back. I know it's completely unsafe, but hey, it was the '70's! Seatbelts schmeatbelts! When we got to the Grand Canyon, my brother Dave refused to get out of the van to have a look. He was engrossed in a comic book he was reading and didn't want to stop. Naturally, my parents were displeased with this decision. They forced him to get out of the van and see one of the great wonders of the world. Dave fought for about ten minutes, but then finally submitted. He got out of the van, went over to the rim, looked out at the magnificence of the view that we had driven two thousand miles to see for about 15 seconds, said, "Okay, great," and went back to the van to read his comic book. Later, when he had finished reading, he did take a hike down to the bottom of the canyon, so not all was lost. But the whole event just goes to show that some spectacular sights can be lost on people, that they can fail to have a sense of the greatness of the occasion. They're busy, preoccupied, just getting on with life.

W.H. Auden's poem, *Musée des beaux arts*, captures something of this, in regard to great suffering, but it could be equally said of any other great event. You need to remember one thing from Greek mythology to understand this poem, and that is that Icarus was the boy who flew too close to the sun with wax wings, and when they melted, he fell into the sea. It's a poem about a painting by one of the Old Dutch Master's, Breughel.

About suffering they were never wrong,
 The Old Masters; how well, they understood
 Its human position; how it takes place
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
 For the miraculous birth, there always must be
 Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
 On a pond at the edge of the wood:
 They never forgot
 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
 Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
 Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
 Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
 In Breugel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

What has this all to do with Christmas? Well, the birth of Christ, the Savior of the world, happened in such a strange way that it mostly went unnoticed, like the sight of the boy falling from the sky in the poem. The ship had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on, and at Christ's birth, the world went on afterwards just the way it had before his birth. I'm sure that if the innkeeper had had any inkling of who was about to be born, he would have made room in his inn for Mary and Joseph and the baby to be. But he didn't. He just saw a young penniless couple at his door and thought of the mess and fuss of a birth. He didn't need that problem on his hands. "Sorry, no vacancy." I'm sure that if any of the other guests at inn had known who was about to be born, they would have offered him their rooms. But as it was, they were too tired from their own journeys to care who was banging at the door begging for a room. "Please stop banging out there. It's late and we're trying to sleep in here."

I'm sure that the shepherds who heard the angels' announcement and saw the spectacular sight of choirs of angels singing from heaven must have been expecting something even better and more spectacular when they got to the manger. But that's not what they got. All they saw was a mother and a child and no angels, no heavenly choirs, no glows, no halos, no bold pronouncements. "So that's it," they must have said to themselves, "it's just a kid." "Hmm. (Pause five seconds, nod head) Okay, let's get back to the flocks," and like my brother Dave at the Grand Canyon, they got back in their van and drove off. Like the children skating on the rink at the birth of the miraculous child, King Herod didn't particularly want this birth to happen. He was a king in name only, appointed by the Romans with no legitimacy. If a true king of Israel was to be born, he was in trouble. So when he heard of the birth of the new king from the Magi, he tried to search him out. He greeted the Savior's birth with murder and mayhem. After his crime, he assumed he had dealt with the problem, and carried on as before.

What a strange way to save the world this is! One might have thought that Abraham Lincoln's words from the Gettysburg Address would be appropriate here: "the world will little note nor long remember" what happened that night. This is God's plan? At first sight, it's a crazy plan. I'm sure we could think of three better ones right now. I mean, okay, he's going to rule the world, let's make him the son of the Roman Emperor. Surely that would have been easier. Start him off big, get the ball rolling right away. Power, baby, that's the ticket, not "baby power." Or, since he's going to be the Savior promised to Israel and the world, why not make him the son of the high priestly family, so that he could in turn become the high priest and proclaim salvation from the Temple. Why not make him a holy human, instead of God coming in wholly human form?

I would have thought that it would have been better for God to be showier about the whole thing. How about a little magnificence to go along with the birth of the Savior? Why not write the message of salvation across the sky in the stars, or thunder it from heaven or blow it in a voice on the wind? Why not something a lot more spectacular? Make a big display of it, hire an advertising company, get the word out in a Super Bowl commercial, get some positive buzz going with a publicist? Why have the baby born and then hear nothing about him, at all!!!! for the next twelve years. Nothing! Like it never happened.

Perhaps this, too, is part of the Gospel message, this crazy way that God chose to save the world. It's not about power and control, as if God needed politics to get God's will done on earth. It's not about overpowering people and nations, conquering them as the Romans did. Instead, the birth itself reminds us that Christ came in service, and though he had all power in heaven and earth, he used it to heal and to teach, not to dominate and threaten. "Power corrupts," said Lord Acton, "and absolute power corrupts absolutely," but in Christ's case, we see absolute power used incorruptibly for service, we see the power of the Almighty used to produce the weakness of a baby. God shows another way for power to be used. To submit to God's power is perfect freedom, not slavery at all.

It's not about religious institutions and traditions, either. God breaks into the world in a single life, not to give us precepts about how to live, not to give us doctrinal statements but to show us a beautiful and perfect life lived before our eyes. No creed or confession can ever replace the fullness of that life. No need for a high priest, either, as God has become accessible without priests -- one of us. No one will be too scared to come to God this way -- a baby is the least threatening creature in the world.

And it's not about putting on a show. It's not about fireworks or spin or "showtime!" (Jack Nicholson voice, with hands). God has all the glory in the world already. God doesn't need to show off or put on a display. God's goal isn't for us to kowtow and suck up to God -- "Oh, we're all very impressed down here, Lord" -- but for us to know God and become friends with God. As Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper, "You call me Teacher and Lord, and it is right for you to do so, for that is what I am," but a little later he tells them that they are no longer just disciples, but friends, establishing a new relationship between God and humanity forever. But it all began in the innocence of that manger, long before, when God chose not to put on a show.

Most people at the time may have missed the significance of that birth, but we don't have to. We can see in the very manner of God's coming into the world that this would be something different, something special, not just power or tradition or spin, but a new way of being, a life lived for all to see, God in human flesh, available for all to approach. People back then may have gone on with their innkeeping, their censusing, their shepherding, or their kinging, and people now may go on with their shopping, their partying, their celebrating the season without noticing the significance of the baby born in that stable, but we don't have to. We know the end of the story. We know that this strange sight of a baby born in the hay is the way that God

chose to save the world. We can stop for more than a few minutes and gaze in wonder at the child who is God among us, who will live before us, who will heal us, who will teach us, who will give his life for us.

We can take notice that this birth is the dawning of our salvation, and that with the beginning of *this* life the door to *eternal* life swings open for all. It is a strange way to save the world, but it is God's way, and the best way. Let us all rejoice in the baby born in the stable, for unto us a Savior is born, unto us God's Son is given.

Amen