

I'm Tired of Waiting for the Angels

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The holiday season is upon us--a time of parties and celebrations, of gifts and remembrances, a time of music and lights and stories. This morning, I would like to tell you a story. It is a very old story and yet strangely contemporary; a story from long ago and far away, from yesterday morning and just down the road.

Once upon a time there was a young woman, still in her teens, who discovered to her surprise and dismay that she was pregnant. The young woman was unmarried, and truth to tell, she wasn't at all certain who was the father of her child. There was one man with whom she had a special relationship, a man she liked, who was her friend and who was fond of her. Feeling ashamed and confused and with no one else in whom to confide, she shared her troubling discovery with him. At first, he was angry and upset, threatened to walk out of her life forever. But in the end, their mutual concern and affection proved stronger than his wounded pride or her fear, and they decided to stay together and make a home.

The man had limited skills and training. He earned his living by manual labor, but because he was willing to work hard, always there seemed to be just enough to get by. And the pregnancy continued on its course, and gossiping friends wondered why the two of them did not get married, but they seemed to be happy within the framework of their familiar world and in the context of their limited ambitions and dreams.

They could not know that far away, in a distant city, a shaky government was wrestling with difficult economic conditions. There seemed never to be quite enough money; there was an abiding fear that the wealthy and the powerful might withdraw their support from the administration. And so, looking carefully at the economic indicators, and the gross national product, and budget deficits, and other statistics, and being equally careful not to think about specific individuals who made up those statistics, and insisting that a little pain now would benefit everyone in the long-run, the government adopted a new economic policy.

One unintended effect of this policy was that the young man and the pregnant woman were forced to leave their home and their source of income. With the pregnancy now far advanced, they found themselves wandering unfamiliar roads, journeying to a distant city, with no visible means of support and no sense of what to expect in that strange place.

When they arrived in the city, they found it a very busy, bustling place, a commercial center, a military center, full of people--busy, affluent people. It was late in the day when

they arrived and the two newcomers set about to find somewhere safe to spend the night. From place to place they tramped along unfamiliar streets, seeking shelter. But the shelters were full, and no one was allowed to sleep in public places. Over and over again they were told, sometimes compassionately and sometimes harshly, that the beds were all filled, that there was no room, that they would have to move on.

The government, whose economic policies had forced this journey upon them, and thus had created this situation, had no facilities or programs or plans to meet their needs. Besides, it was the conviction of the best thinker within the government that any welfare program would only serve to weaken the sense of self-reliance and therefore would prove to undermine the self-respect of the poor and weaken their initiative.

In the end, the young man discovered a stable. Like any barn, it was not very clean. Dusty and dirty, it smelled of stale urine and sweaty animals. But it offered modest protection from wind and weather. And so there, amid the animal dung, they took shelter for the night. Hungry and tired, they found the cleanest spot possible, wrapped their thin garments about them and fell asleep.

Before long, the young woman--only a child really--began to feel discomfort, and then pain, and then pain again, and then she knew that her baby was about to be born. Alone in the barn, with no family or friends to comfort her, to assure her that it would be all right, with no doctor or midwife to ease her pain or offer instruction, with only the man who loved her to respond to her terror, the young woman--really only a child herself--gave birth to a child. And they found the cleanest straw they could find for a bed, and wrapped the infant in what clothing they could find, and settled down in the drafty, dirty stable.

Now, to this point, there is not much about this story that is remarkable. From the first creation of governments, policy decisions have been made without much concern or awareness of the consequences of those decisions for the people--especially for poor people. Government policies--especially economic policies--have often driven people from their homes, made them vagrants and vagabonds, forced them to find and accept any shelter they could from a strange, indifferent, often hostile world. Many human children have been born into indifferent, if not lethal environments. And the world of power and might has taken little notice of them and offered little compassion or help.

This is a story which, with minor variations is enacted time after time, place after place. And often it ends in tragedy. The man finds he cannot support the small family--he turns to drugs or drink or crime, or he abandons the family and disappears into the legions of the nameless, faceless underclass. The woman, forced to care for herself and a fatherless child, works at menial jobs when she can find them, begs when she can't, sells her body when she must and dies young and worn out. The child, if it survives grows up uneducated, bereft of dreams, unable to break out of the toil of poverty. The child, if it survives, grows up to repeat the family pattern, engendering children that cannot be supported and living always on the fringes of society.

But as you undoubtedly have guessed, that is not the way the story we have been telling ends. At this point in the story, something miraculous happens. According to the story, as we have cobbled it together from various conflicting traditions, a band of angels appears to a group of shepherd--men of the middle class who have a position of respect and responsibility in the community. And the angels announce that a child has been born in a small stable near-by. And the shepherds are instructed to go at once and find the child.

And perhaps most miraculous of all, these solid, middle-class, respectable citizen resist the temptation to form a committee to investigate. Rather, speechless with wonder, they set out to find the child and the mother. And when they have found the man and the woman with the child, the shepherds do not ask questions about the parentage of the baby. Rather, the shepherds congratulate them, and rejoice with them, and offer them reassurance, telling them that theirs is undoubtedly the most beautiful baby the world has ever seen, and reminding them that no one knows what possibilities lie tightly curled in that small body, and encouraging them to care for their child and to love their child and each other.

But that is not the end of the miracles. Led by a star, three sages from distant places arrive at the barn. And miracle of miracles, they resist the classic temptation of intellectuals to do a sociological survey or a psychological analysis, or draw up a developmental plan. They do not even offer advice. Rather, they bring gifts, rich, costly gifts which can be converted into resources needed to nurture the potential represented by that small, fragile infant. And then, warned by an angel, they return by another route to their laboratories and their studies and their telescopes.

And still the miracles continue. This time, the angels come to the man in a dream to warn him that there has been yet another change in government policy. The government has decided that there are too many infants, that in some way they pose a threat to social stability and so the government has adopted a policy which will result in the deaths of many if not all infants in the area. It is nothing personal, of course. Just an unfortunate sacrifice which must be made if government is to remain stable and society is to progress.

"Take the child," orders the angel, "and the mother, and leave at once. Go to another town and there you will find sanctuary and there you can stay until it is safe to return." And the man did as he was told, and the little, unconventional family, although its life was disrupted, was not destroyed by the economic and social policies of a distant and mean-spirited government. And the child lived and grew to adulthood, and though he repeated some of the patterns of his parents--a vagabond with no visible means of support, an unconventional family life, often living off the generosity of well-to-do women, and though he eventually ran afoul of the criminal justice system--nonetheless, he came to be counted as a wise, insightful man and a blessing to those who knew him.

I tell you this story because it is a story which is being repeated, in part, in our own time and in our own land. In the name of fiscal conservatism, governments at every level, all over this prosperous nation are in the process of adopting economic policies which amount to little more than a war on the poor. In his gripping book *AMAZING GRACE*,

Jonathan Kozol recounts the lives of the people, largely women and children, in the South Bronx who struggle to survive in a world which has defined them as a useless burden and a drag on the economy. He talks about the mothers and grandmothers who struggle to keep their children and grandchildren safe and healthy in a world of utter despair and want and need and yet see them dying of disease and violence day after day. He details the consequences of the fact that in the 1980s government subsidy of housing for the poor was cut by 80%, forcing the poor into ever more deplorable and unsafe housing.

Kozol details the consequences of the fact that in the city of New York, in an effort to cut costs, the number of housing inspectors whose job it is to see that housing in places like the South Bronx is safe and clean, has been reduced from 700, twenty five years ago, to fewer than two hundred today, cuts which result in deaths by fire, deaths in falls from unsafe elevators, deaths from disease. He details the consequences of closing hospitals which had serviced the poor, forcing the poor into the overcrowded remaining hospitals or into unregulated prescription mills. He details the consequences of policies which curtail social services in order to finance tax cuts for citizens who earn \$100,000 a year and more. He describes a society which has created a ghetto in which the only growth industry is prisons, a society which spends more on jail than on school, a society which does not despise poor people, but simply wants them to go away, to be invisible and undemanding.

I find it impossible to read this book without weeping and raging. Kozol talks about the occasional miracles which sometimes occur: the children who are reached by organizations and individuals who respond with compassion and concern. But he points out:

The trouble with miracles, however, is that they don't happen for most children; and a good society cannot be built on miracles or on the likelihood that they will keep occurring. There is also a degree of danger that, in emphasizing these unusual relationships and holding up for praise the very special children who can take advantage of them, without making clear how rare these situations are, we may seem to be condemning those who don't have opportunities like these, or, if they do, cannot respond to them

Kozol, Jonathan, AMAZING GRACE, Crown, 1995, p. 160.

In places like the South Bronx, there are countless madonnas and their children for whom the angels never come, for whom there are no shepherds to affirm the beauty and the potential within the children, for whom there are no sages wise enough to offer resources and withhold advice. In places like the South Bronx there are men and women who struggle against impossible odds and lose. And they are expendable. They are the targets of campaigns to "end welfare as we know it." As if, indeed, most of us ever did know it! They are the victims of campaigns to "down-size government"--meaning to weaken if not destroy the fragile network of resources which sustain their lives. They are the ones who

will pay for tax-cuts for the upper classes and the salary increases for politicians and bureaucrats. They don't produce anything but children and we don't need their children.

It is not surprising, this holiday season, as I read the papers and listen to the news reports about budgets and deficits and new economic proposals, as I find my retirement fund growing as a consequence of a euphoric stock market, as we scramble to find ways to reduce our tax liabilities, that what I hear in my inner ear is not the song of the angels, but the smooth, clear, cynical voice of Herod the Great.

In his book, *IF YOU CAME THIS WAY*, Peter Davis assures us that the conditions Kozol describes in the South Bronx can be found in Bangor, Maine, and in San Antonio, in Chicago and in Oakland, California. Exploring the lives of the underclass from coast to coast--women and men and children who have been defined as expendable, as unredeemable--David concludes that the underclass, the poor who remain poor and whose children and grandchildren remain poor--is a consequence of many complicated factors. He describes a handful of small, underfunded programs here and there which offer some hope of intervening to break the cycle of poverty and exclusion--almost every one of which is threatened by emerging government policies. He weeps over the vast numbers--more than twelve million people--who are not touched by such programs--a number which will almost certainly increase in the face of proposed economic policies now working their way through Congress and state legislatures and city halls.

Davis concludes that the the war on poverty of the 1960s has become the war on the poor of the 1990s, and while he admits that old programs did not always work as we had hoped, he warns that the only way to "end welfare as we know it" is "to end poverty as we know it." That, he says, will take national leadership determined to meet the responsibilities of government as we defined it at the beginning: "to ensure domestic tranquility, establish justice and promote the general welfare." Davis suggests that "rather than amending the Constitution, we would do better simply to read it." (*Davis, Peter, IF YOU CAME THIS WAY, Wiley, 1995, p.184.*)

The point to all of this is to plead with you this holiday season to recognize that we cannot afford to wait for the angels. The miracles are too few and too far between. While each of us has an obligation to do what we can do as individuals, acting out of our abundance to meet the needs of others--writing the check, giving the clothing, providing the food, contributing time to help house our homeless guests--none of this is enough. In addition to whatever private charity we may be able to give, it is time to insist that the war on the poor, at all levels, stop.

As you send your holiday cards, write a letter, send a fax, send e-mail, communicate in any way you can to our political leaders at every level. Tell them that it is immoral to talk of cutting taxes at the expense of the poor and the helpless and the hopeless among us. Tell them that Herod the Great and his treatment of the innocent is no model for a great and wealthy democracy to follow. Remind them of the constitution and their sworn duty "to promote the *general* welfare." Remind them that democracy is government of the people, by the people and *for the people*. Tell them that the only angels we can count on

are the angels of our better nature. Tell them that a society that really cares about children would not condemn millions of them to lives of poverty, homelessness, despair and hopelessness. Tell them that a society which does not care about children, about all children, has lost its moral compass and sold its soul for a handful of silver. Tell them. Tell them.

I do not expect you to spend this holiday season in morbid despair over the state of the nation. I charge you to find time to be with your families and friends, to cultivate your own soul, to laugh and sing and enjoy the life that is yours and the lives which are woven into yours. Find times and occasions to be grateful for all the gifts which have come to you--those you have earned and those which are the gifts of a bountiful universe and can never be earned or deserved. But I hope that you will find a moment to be mindful of the madonnas and children who shelter in the dirty, drafty, dangerous stables of our land, and while praying for miracles, do what you can to to change the lethal policies which threaten the little they have. The great African-American preacher and mystic, Howard Thurman put the challenge in these words:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star of the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work...begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the brothers,
to make music in the heart.