

Jesus was a Palestinian Jew

December 31, 2023 (Luke 2:22-40)

New Year's Eve Day Service

Good morning. Today is New Year's Eve Day, as I'm sure many of you are aware - a time for resolutions, something 'effervescent,' perhaps, and a big, LED ball descending upon Times Square. We'll sing Auld Lang Syne, maybe push ourselves to stay up past midnight (not me), and carry forward fresh hopes into 2024. A little story: back when I was a chaplain resident, I befriended one of the respiratory therapists in the hospital - a good, decent man - and after I completed my residency, we became friends on social media. Well, turns out that he and I had very different opinions about most, well, everything. So when I did what I traditionally do on this day every year: post a harmless little piece on the numerology of the upcoming year - **he told me I was practicing witchcraft**. Numerology, I was informed, was a tool of the devil. Suffice it to say, our 'friendship' did not survive much longer.

And while it saddens me that our digital relationship met such a demise, I did find the accusation somewhat amusing. After all, **numbers mattered** to the characters in the Bible. Take the number 12, for instance:

the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve disciples. Or how about the number three? The trinity, the resurrection, Jonah in the belly of that big fish. Better yet, how about seven? **Not seven, but seventy times seven?** Hello, do the math!!! Numbers had significance and meaning for these people.

So, naturally I've been thinking about what I'll post later today about the numerological significance of this coming year, 2024, which may or may not make me a heretic - you decide. And if you, indeed, do the math (talk it out), then we are on the cusp of an eight universal year. And this really excites me for several reasons I'll get to - but first, let's talk about this text-

Because, in light of the ongoing war between Israel and Palestine, this text takes on a whole new significance. And we need to talk about this: we need to talk about what's happening there, not only because ***it is happening***, but because, as people of morals and values and faith, I believe we **have an obligation** to address it.

So let's start with Jesus, shall we? In today's scripture, the infant Jesus is presented in the temple *according to the Law of Moses*, meaning, ***Jesus was Jewish***. Now, this probably doesn't come as much of a surprise to you, because throughout the biblical writ Jesus speaks of the Law and obeying the Law. Nonetheless, it bears repeating: **Jesus was a devoted, practicing Jew.** And it is good, I think, for us to remember this as we resist

lures to demonize our Jewish and Israeli siblings amidst their suffering and sorrow while naming the brutal actions of the Israeli government. Jesus was Jewish, and to ascribe to antisemitism is to rebuke Jesus himself.

And this Jesus we speak of was born in Bethlehem, which, at the time of his birth, would have been located in the land of Judah. Now, I want to issue a *mea culpa* here because I realized that my sermon title is slightly misleading. Palestine, at the time of Jesus' birth and as we know it today, did not exist. According to Britannica:

The word Palestine [derives](#) from Philistia, the name given by Greek writers to the land of the [Philistines](#), who in the 12th century BCE occupied a small pocket of land on the southern coast, between modern [Tel Aviv–Yafo](#) and Gaza. The name was revived by the Romans in the 2nd century CE in “Syria Palaestina,” designating the southern portion of the province of Syria, and made its way thence into Arabic, where it has been used to describe the region at least since the early Islamic era.

Ergo, it would have been more accurate of me to entitle the sermon “Jesus *would have been* a Palestinian Jew *today*,” because Bethlehem is presently located in the West Bank. Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, a Palestinian Christian pastor located in Bethlehem, gave a powerful sermon on December 23rd

entitled, "Christ in the Rubble," which illuminated this fact, providing a painful account of how the infant Jesus, born today, would be born into a war-torn region where thousands of Palestinian women and children have senselessly lost their lives, crushed under the weight of disproportionate violence and destruction. The infant Jesus, born today, would be born in the West Bank, where Bethlehem was raided on Christmas Day. The infant Jesus, born today, *would have been* a Palestinian Jew - **not one or the other, but both** - indeed, born under the rubble.

So what would that mean for this current conflict? What would having a both-and, Palestinian AND Jewish, Jesus mean? We heard it last week, and we hear it again in this text: **Jesus has come as good news for all the people!** Jesus didn't show up for a select few: he showed up for Israel *and* the Gentiles! **Everyone.** But here's the rub: it's as Simeon proclaimed in this text, his arrival isn't going to be welcomed by all. In fact, it will be resisted, fought over, and downright *opposed* by many while pulling back the curtain on what truly lies in their hearts and minds. And this, my friends, is what makes an eight universal year *dangerous*.

Because an eight year is revelatory. It is a year of **power**. It reveals to us the truth of what lies beneath because of its overwhelming allure. At its best, an eight universal year raises the consciousness and vibration of the

whole and invites increased levels of integrity. It is masterful, successful, and breeds authority. But misapplied? It can lead to **greed, selfishness, mindless acquisition, impatience, and intimidation**. In that, it ceases to be powerful at all.

Now, many of you have heard me say this before: I believe there is a difference between power and force. While colloquially we like to use the term **power** to describe many things - people in power, those with power, political power - I think it is important to distinguish the two. Because the atrocities we are witnessing right now? Are the shadow side of power, or what I call *force*. And **force** is a tool of the empire. Force is fear-based and can be sniffed out anytime we witness the imposition of might. Force is self-serving, grandiose, and distorted. It is violent, manipulative, and destructive. And you know what?

Jesus didn't deal in force. God doesn't deal in force.

And how do we know that? Because Jesus came not as some military general to wipe everybody out, but as a *baby*. Jesus came as an infant to usher in a new way of being - one that is no longer rooted in force but in **power**. Because power, beloved? Is rooted in **love**. **Power** is encountered in acts of mercy and forgiveness. **Power** is situated in an ethic of non-violence. **Power** is found in humility, meekness, and service. These

are reflections of genuine power - not dropping bombs on hospitals, schools, and refugee camps - not taking hostages - not refusing humanitarian aid to people who are bleeding, starving, and terrified. What we are witnessing, right now, is a gross act of force, the eight universal year energy perverted into self-serving, fearful, deranged action. Simeon sought consolation for Israel - **force** will not bring it. Anna sought redemption for Israel - **force** will not deliver it. **There is no amount of force on earth that will realize the power the infant Jesus has promised us.** And right now? That power is buried underneath the rubble of violence and injustice.

So, beloved: our challenge in this approaching year is to **excavate this power.** To dig deep within ourselves and be the peacemakers this world needs. To probe our own hearts and minds and root out our own forceful inclinations. To rebuke force in all of its manifestations and embody power through acts of love and compassion and care. To name injustices where they occur and speak truth to **LOVE**. And to be allies so that the presently-powerless can stand in their own power. This is what Jesus came for - this is now our opportunity.

Beloved, let us realize the true meaning of **power**, and let us boldly proclaim it in 2024. Amen.