

THE GIFT OF PURPOSE

Matthew 1: 18-25, 2: 13-15, 19-23

Christmas should not be an escape from the world. If Christmas is to offer us the best gift of all, it has to be the gift of finding a renewed purpose for our lives in the world. So then, to help us find some inspiration this Christmas, let me begin with a story, a story that is, sadly, all too real in our world today.

Pardeep Kaleka is a devout Sikh who lives in the U.S. Like many Black, Indigenous and people of colour, Pardeep has also experienced racism much of his life. And sometimes, the racism has been extreme. 10 years ago on a Sunday morning, Pardeep was on his way to the temple with his children. On the way his daughter told him she had forgotten her notebook for Sunday School. A little irritated yet understanding, Pardeep turned the car around and went back home. They were going to be late, but this was common for many families with children.

On his way back to the temple, Pardeep noticed a number of police cars racing past him with lights flashing. Something was going on. Once he arrived at the temple, he saw police cars and ambulances surrounding the building. Something terrible had happened. Immediately he got his phone and started calling family members and friends. His parents were regulars at the temple and he knew most everyone who attended worship on a Sunday. He jumped out of his car and tried to get past the police tape. He tried to find out any information he could. Later he would find out that there was a mass shooting. Ten people were shot and six of them had died! One of the dead was Pardeep's own father! Pardeep was in shock! How could this be?!... A flood of emotions bulldozed through him...

And if the tragedy of the deaths wasn't bad enough, it was revealed that the shooter was a self-proclaimed white supremacist who had targeted the temple specifically and people like Pardeep, his family and community. This mass shooting at the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, in 2012, was the worst race-based attack in U.S. history up to that point since the KKK bombing of a black church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1963. Sadly there have been other mass shootings in temples, mosques, synagogues and churches throughout North America, since.

Pardeep was devastated. From anger, to frustration, to grief, to helplessness... How could this be?! What to do? What world were his children growing up in?!...

Well, before I continue with more of Pardeep's story, let's ponder our scripture reading this evening as it tells the story of Jesus' birth and infancy from the perspective of Joseph. Like Pardeep, Joseph is also a man in crisis. But Joseph's threat comes from within his own heart and conscience, and from his community. His betrothed is pregnant. The circumstances are sketchy. But even if he claims responsibility, the shame and disgrace of a pregnancy before official marriage in a tight-knit peasant community would be impossible to get past.

And even as Joseph will find a way to embrace Mary and the child to be born regardless of social conventions and potential social shaming, his family will face threats from the tyrant king Herod too. But like his name's sake a thousand years earlier, Joseph trusts his dreams and the voice of God within him. Somehow, he finds his purpose in the face of the crises before him. Joseph will never have imagined his life would have had to face such challenges. And yet, because he trusts the God of his dreams who lives in his heart, he will find a new purpose to his life in caring and protecting his family as refugees in search of safety.

Joseph could cave in. He could give in to anger at Mary, at life, at God... and maybe he does for a moment or two... Joseph could also give in to despair... He could easily become bitter... Herod's threats could definitely instill the kind of terror that paralyzes people into submission... All this could be possible and who could blame Joseph or anyone who falls into any of these ways of being when crisis hits hard and overwhelms...

But the invitation to Joseph and to anyone of us when life is turned upside down by happenings we have not welcomed and cannot control, is how to find the faith, the courage, the hope and the love to choose life and to discern a positive way forward...

And maybe this is the very real gift Christmas is inviting us to find, namely, finding God as the power of faith and hope through love in a whole new way as we navigate our life at this time we are living them. How will we find our God-given purpose in our relationships, life's demands, maybe some new life limitations imposed on us or losses thrown at us, or maybe some yet to be discovered possibilities in the very midst of what has come or what is happening... How will we discover the Christ child in our

midst this Christmas and how will we find the path to follow him so that we become his hands, feet and heart in the world anew this Christmas and beyond?...

Maybe the rest of Pardeep's story may inspire us. Let's see...

After this terrible attack upon his community, Pardeep says that many fellow Sikhs became more closed and wary. And who could blame them. But Pardeep found it in him somehow to choose greater openness. He decided to respond to the cruel tragedy that had upturned his life with compassion. There's a saying in Sikhism, he says - *Charhdi Kala*, which means: we move with relentless optimism. For Pardeep, *Charhdi Kala* and compassion go together. There is deep and positive faith in the power of compassion to heal and transform.

But this healing and transforming power of compassion must also include forgiveness, says Pardeep, and forgiveness is not a one time thing. It is a journey and sometimes a long one. And forgiveness has to include justice, but a justice that is not about vengeance, but about greater cooperation and understanding across racial differences and identities. Someone came into our most sacred space, Pardeep says, and tried to break us and divide us. With *Charhdi Kala*, the purpose of our response is to reach out, to include the other and say this will not happen again.

So how did Pardeep fulfill this new purpose he found in his heart, inspired by the relentless optimism of his faith in *Charhdi Kala*? He reached out to a former white supremacist: Arno Michaelis. Not only did Arno agree to talk to Pardeep. He helped Pardeep understand the kind of twisted thinking that drives a white supremacist to commit terrible atrocities. Arno shared with Pardeep the self-destructive nature of hate, and the painful consequences of identifying with the white supremacist ideology.

Since that meeting, Arno and Pardeep have grown close. In fact, Pardeep now thinks of Arno like a brother. Together they began an organization called: "Served 2 Unite", through which they wage peace together in honour of Pardeep's father and all those whose lives have been lost because of racist violence. Children from various ethnicities, from the inner city to the suburbs, are brought together to learn how to cherish each other as human beings and to assume the identity of peacemakers in their schools and communities.

Pardeep is still haunted by what happened to his father and others on that fateful day. Forgiveness continues to be a journey for him and some days, he says, it's really hard.

Sometimes, he says, my children tell me I hug them for too long. “Perhaps I do,” says Pardeep. “Sometimes I kneel by their beds and sit and reflect while they are sleeping. I thought, at first, I was experiencing post-traumatic stress, but actually what I’m experiencing is post-traumatic growth. I value each day more than someone who hasn’t gone through this, but of course I wouldn’t wish it upon anyone.”

Whether we want to call it post-traumatic growth or something else, the key difference for someone like Pardeep and for someone like Joseph in our gospel story, is that they found a new purpose in the face of terrible realities not of their choosing. Even though every child is a gift, Joseph had to come to this understanding and believe it deep in his heart if he was going to choose to embrace Mary and the child in her regardless of the shame and hardship such a choice would bring.

Choosing the way of love and finding our purpose in life through compassion is really hard sometimes. Love without cost isn’t real love. As much joy, ecstasy and fulfillment it may bring, the faith required to believe in love can really be hard sometimes. The currents pulling us downwards can be strong. The temptation to escape the troubles of the world and the needs of our neighbours can be powerful. We can be thrown off and thrown into anger and despair all too often because of life’s circumstances and losses. And yet, the true story of Christmas is an invitation to find our purpose again, our purpose through faith in God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, a purpose rooted in a fresh experience that love can win if we are granted the courage and passion to follow its call... Amen.

Prayer: Grant us the courage and faith in the power of your love, this Christmas, O God, and may the best gift of all become a renewal of purpose in our lives...
Amen.