

Spiritual Parasites and the Celebration of Hanukkah

This is the time we would normally celebrate Hanukkah.

The scripture today is Mary's "Magnificat" - **Luke 1:46-55** - but we'll get there by a circuitous route.

Mary's conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit exposed her as a target of suspicion. Being pregnant and unmarried must have sparked accusations as soon as the pregnancy began to show. Joseph would not have escaped suspicion either.

As He would show later in His life, the presence of Jesus leaves humans with no cloak for our sin.

- **John 15:22** - "If I had not come and spoken to them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin."

The hallmark and fruit of human sin is accusation, because Satan is the "accuser of the brethren."

- **Revelation 12:11** - "...for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.

Why did God choose to bring His Son into the world in a way that brought tribulation to Mary?

I think the reason is in the season. Hanukkah celebrated risk in the midst of tribulation. The miracle of the eight days of the menorah lights occurred while the war was still going on, not at the end. The Israelites had succeeded in regaining the Temple, but more battles loomed. If the Menorah flickered out, it would have been a tremendous blow to morale. Judah risked it anyway.

The same mix of risk and tribulation can be seen in the story of Judith and Holofernes.

Tribulation clarifies our resolve and focuses the mind and spirit. Jesus is revealed. And the cloak is taken away to reveal any unbelief within.

The Winter Solstice

At this time of year, the days are the shortest and the darkness seems to envelop the world. We believe the evidence shows Jesus was conceived on Hanukkah, bringing His Light into the world when the contrast with darkness was the greatest.

But something else happens in the dead of winter.

Consider the seasonal mistletoe that often joins our holiday festivities and, when

dangled over someone's head, invites a kiss. The evergreen sprig has a dark side, and displays a picture for us.

Mistletoe

Mistletoe is a parasite. A parasite is a "consumer." It lives off of others, has no roots of its own and steals nutrients from its host without giving back.

Spiritually this involves a sole focus on meeting its own needs rather than giving to benefit the whole community.

Even Satan is parasitic, gaining his existence from God even while rebelling against Him.

Satan can't exist separate from God's own existence.

“To be bad, [Satan] must exist and have intelligence and will. But existence, intelligence, and will are in themselves good. Therefore he must be getting them from the Good Power; even to be bad he must borrow or steal from his opponent. And do you now begin to see why Christianity has always said that the devil is a fallen angel? That is not a mere story for the children. It is a real recognition of the fact that evil is a parasite, not an original thing.”

- *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, p.43

Synergistic or symbiotic relationships - two or more entities working together - are not all bad.

There are symbiotic relationships where both parties benefit: that's called mutualism. Then sometimes one person benefits and the other is unaffected: that's called commensalism.

And then you have those dangerous relationships when one partner benefits at the expense of the other: that's parasitism.

Parasites usually remain hidden. Leeches for instance inject a numbing agent so you don't even know they're attached and sucking your blood. We see the evergreen mistletoe only when the cold weather causes the oak tree to drop its leaves. Then the mistletoe's continuing greenness set against the brown of winter's ravages draws our eye.

In the same way, parasitic relationships come to light when the host comes under distress of some kind. When grief or sacrifice or need afflicts the host community and its "leaves are falling" and yet this one area continues to suck up nutrients and remain "green," you know it is only seeking for itself. It retains a separate identity even while attached to the greater whole.

'Dung of the Branch'

Mistletoe produces berries. But the purpose of the berries is to attract birds, which eat

them and then poop them out on other tree branches, or wipe the sticky berry juice off their beaks on a branch. Mistletoe can only grow on a tree branch.

The name "Mistletoe" come from the Old English term "mistiltan," which is derived from the word "mistil" meaning dung and "tan" meaning twig or branch.

"Mistil" also became a term for bird lime, an adhesive paste made by mashing up the sticky mistletoe berries that was then smeared on tree branches to catch birds.

Tudor English herbalist William Turner explains:

"[The thrush] shiteth out the miscel berries well prepared in her bodye and layeth them upon the tre[e.] The berries grow into a bushe and the bushe bringeth furth berries, and of the berries the fouler maketh byrde lyme."

Competing with the miracle of Hanukkah, Mistletoe bears its fruit - white berries - at the time of the Winter Solstice. Because it maintains its green color in winter, it became a picture of fertility, life and resurrection in pagan myth. However, its berries are poisonous to humans.

The Story of Baldar and Loki

In Norse myth, when Odin's son Balder had dreams foreboding his death, his mother, Frigg, took oaths from all the creatures on earth, as well as from fire, water, metals, trees, stones, and illnesses, not to harm Balder. Only the mistletoe was thought too young and slender to take the oath. (Also, it technically doesn't live "on earth.") Baldar's trickster brother Loki fooled the blind god Hodor into shooting an arrow or spear made from mistletoe (or tipped with its poison berries) at Baldar, which killed him.

In one version of the Baldar story, the goddess Frigg persuaded the other gods to restore Balder to life. She repaid their obliging wizardry with kisses. The gods also made the mistletoe promise that it would never again do an uncharitable deed but would forever be consecrated to acts of happiness and usefulness. Thus, kissing under the mistletoe recalls this tale.

Baldar has been compared to other dying and reviving gods like Adonis or Tammuz. He also has Christ-like features. His death is similar to the Greek story of Achilles - who was invulnerable except for his heel.

Loki is said to symbolize the dark side of Odin. He produced three evil offspring — the goddess of death, named Hel, the monstrous serpent surrounding the world, Jörmungand, and the wolf Fenrir (Fenrisúlfr), who lies chained until he will break loose in the Ragnarök, the end of the world of gods and men. Loki himself lies bound but will break his bonds in the Ragnarök to join the giants in battle against the gods.

After this end of the world of gods and men, the earth will rise again, the innocent Balder will return from the dead, and the hosts of the just will live in a hall roofed with gold.

An old Christian tradition said that mistletoe was once a tree, and it furnished the wood of the Cross. After the Crucifixion, the tree was cursed and the plant shriveled and became dwarfed into a parasitic vine.

Mistletoe Flouts the Law

Whereas most plants grow towards the light, and use gravity to inform their growth patterns, mistletoe does its own thing, and grows away from the light (towards the tree), and ignores the law of gravity. Once the parasite penetrates the tree's bark, it will manipulate the host tree, and steal all the resources that it needs to grow, flower and reproduce.

Mistletoe, the Leech

Mistletoe as a type reflects the kind of people that anthropologists call social "free riders," those who don't contribute to the common good but benefit from being in the community.

This is the opposite of the life of a believer, in which Jesus told us it is better to give than to receive.

Paul said things like, "Those unwilling to work will not get to eat." (**2 Thessalonians 3:10**) and "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." (**Romans 14:19**)

The templates we use to understand the meaning of the church - for instance the many members comprising the unity of the human body, the branches united with the Vine, the relationship between the Bride and the Bridegroom, the living stones that make up the spiritual temple - picture for us a mutual sharing, even sacrifice for the good of the whole, even to the point of laying down one's life for one another.

Of course, the individual members do receive life from this relationship, but only if they are committed to the whole, and give back to let the life flow through them. Otherwise there is no balance, and the larger entity begins to suffer. The cells of the organism can become cancerous.

If enough mistletoe attaches to a tree, the tree will die, But this is rare, because the mistletoe for its own survival needs the tree to exist and live.

Parasites Revealed by Adversity

When adversity strikes the community, the whole organism comes together - sharing to survive. But parasitic people instead complain and blame others while continuing to take. Their response to tribulation is accusation. Previously they were indistinguishable from the other leaves and branches in the tree. Now, suddenly, they're revealed.

When the strength of the tree is at its lowest, stripped of leaves at the winter solstice when the days are short and the sun is dim, the parasitic mistletoe bears its poisonous berries and reproduces, continuing the cycle.

We see parasitic behavior in many areas of life:

- In Personal Relationships - marked by narcissism, codependency, manipulation, neediness, insisting on rights above duty
- In Society - ignoring the common good to serve yourself instead; tribalism vs communal unity; manipulation or oppression vs cooperation; suspicion vs trust.
- In relation to common natural resources - instead of acting as a good steward of God's creation, parasites "liquidate" natural resources for immediate use for financial gain at the expense of future generations.
- Spiritual - parasites never understand love, thankfulness or praise.

We might be giving and unselfish in much of our life, but be responding like a parasite in only one area, without even knowing it. That's one reason adversity comes into our lives - to reveal to us our own selfishness.

God may cause our "leaves to fall off" in a time of grief, or pain, or tribulation so we can finally recognize our own selfishness. Fasting can produce the same result.

The Ten Virgins

In **Matthew 25:1-13** we see a similar portrayal of this in the story of the Ten Virgins, who were waiting for the Bridegroom. (Waiting itself can be a form of stress and tension). When the Bridegroom arrives, it becomes apparent that five of the Virgins did not bring any oil for their lamps. At this point they are revealed as parasites, like the Mistletoe. They were depending on the other five for their supply.

Matthew 25:8 - "And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out."

The other five responded *mépote*, which in Greek means "certainly not! Not ever; never." Why wouldn't the other five share? That seems like the Christian thing to do. But it was impossible, because that would have ended their mission - too many mistletoe would kill the tree.

There is no good outcome in this picture. The mistletoe just keeps on reproducing.

Repentance can free us from the cycle, but to do that we must be miraculously transformed by the Holy Spirit and do something no parasite can do on its own - decide to die to self.

The message of the parable of the Ten Virgins is to repent immediately of our self-seeking, parasitic inclination, before the Bridegroom returns.

That's why the midwinter Hanukkah story of Judith is important. Going to the cross, cutting off the head of Holofernes, is the only way to stop the self-seeking of Adam, of us.

The Magnificat - Where Are We Enriching Ourselves?

Finally, we see in Mary's "Magnificat" (**Luke 1:46-55**) the solution and cure for our parasitic behavior. This was her Holy Spirit-inspired declaration made while visiting Elizabeth, probably in the Levite city of Hebron, a city of refuge "in the hill country of Judah." Elizabeth was six months pregnant with John the Baptist, Mary had just been visited by the Angel on Hanukkah, and Jesus was newly conceived in her womb.

Here's the main point:

Luke 1:51 - "He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away."

"rich" = *plouteō* - "those who are enriching themselves"

This is the definition of the parasite. Always enriching themselves without giving or benefiting others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis, called the Magnificat "the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung."

Some governments considered the song's message to be dangerously subversive. During the British rule of India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in churches. Dictatorships in the very Catholic societies of Guatemala and Argentina banned Mary's words from being recited or displayed publicly. The authorities were threatened by its message as much as Imperial Rome or King Herod.

Later, from the stable or cave in which Jesus lay in a meager feeding trough in Bethlehem, Mary could have looked southeast and seen Herod the Great's majestic palatial resort known as the Herodium. The Herodium sits on a manmade mountain nearly 2,500 feet high. At the time, it was the largest palatial complex in the Roman world. It was built with taxes wrung out of the poor people of Judea. In its shadow, Christ was born.

The question we should ask ourselves at Hanukkah is "where am I enriching myself?" Where am I sitting atop my own Herodium, my palatial resort, looking down on Jesus?

The 18th century commentator John Gill saw that Mary was talking about those "not rich in this world's goods... but such who are *rich in their opinions*, and in their own works; and trust in their righteousness [or their own 'rightness'], and despise [or dismiss] others; these, as they come full of themselves to the throne of grace, as the Pharisee, are sent empty away."

You may not look rich, you may be barely getting by, but only *you* know if you are *enriching* yourself.

Unrepentant parasites will only hear this word from Jesus: "I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (or "self-exertion"). They are sent away empty, like Mary said.

Hanukkah is all about self-emptying and humility, and the diminishing of pride, personal glory and striving for worldly success.

Let us mark Hanukkah with sincerity and truth, embrace tribulation, lay our lives down, and in this way let His Light shine through us.