

“Is the Yoke On You?”

Advent I

Reformation, Media

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In the Old Testament, some of the prophets would use dramatic visuals to drive home the point of their message. Jeremiah, for example, was told to “Make a yoke of straps and bars and put them on your neck.” This yoke was to let the people of Israel know that they would be under the yoke of Babylonia king Nebuchadnezzar and learn the hardship of servitude because of their unfaithfulness as evidenced by their acceptance of false gods and listening to false prophets whose deceptive words would lead to the heavy yoke of servitude. It made me wonder about the yokes that we wear as evidence of our subjection to false gods, and the burdens we carry because of our servitude to other ruling passions.

For example, I saw a picture on the internet that showed hundreds of people lined up at the Macy’s store at Herald Square in New York, but the same scene played out at stores all over the country. A friend told me that at a local Walmart, on Thanksgiving Day there were big shrink wrapped pallets in the aisles with signs on them – “Discounted items – 10 p.m.”; “Sale items 12:00 a.m.”; “Specials – 2:00 a.m.” luring shoppers back at the wee hours of the morning and telling store employees when to open them up. At a time of deep economic concern, there are few better images of how we are yoked to a consumer economy than the frenzy of Black Friday. . Like that earliest of computer games – PAC Man – it seems as if our objective is to gobble as much stuff as possible as quickly as possible.

The weight of its burden presses on us as TV ads brainwash our kids to pester their parents to purchase gifts that will be unused within two weeks after Christmas. All this in anticipation of a gift laden Christmas of things we don't need bought with money we don't have to feed a habit we can't shake, The yoke of economic servitude, which in tough economic times is accentuated by unemployment, underemployment, and increased debts in our efforts to serve the demands of the commercial gods.

Of course the source of all yokes is sin. In a notable passage in Lamentations, Jeremiah says, "Jerusalem remembers, in the days of her affliction and wandering, the precious things that were hers in days of old." It reminded me of the classic musical *Camelot*. If you know the story of that musical, it is about the perfect time and place that Camelot represents. Early in the show there is a song that Lancelot sings as he comes to join the knights of the Round Table . . .

The soul of a knight should be a thing remarkable,
His heart and his mind as pure as morning dew.
With a will and a self-restraint
That's the envy of ev'ry saint
He could easily work a miracle or two.
To love and desire he ought to be unsparkable,
The ways of the flesh should offer no allure.
But where in the world
Is there in the world

A man so untouched and pure?

(C'est moi!)

C'est moi! C'est moi, I blush to disclose.

I'm far too noble to lie.

That man in whom

These qualities bloom,

C'est moi, c'est moi, 'tis I.

I've never strayed

From all I believe;

I'm blessed with an iron will.

Had I been made

The partner of Eve,

We'd be in Eden still.

C'est moi! C'est moi! The angels have chose

To fight their battles below,

And here I stand, as pure as a pray'r,

Incredibly clean, with virtue to spare,

The godliest man I know!

C'est moi!

If you know the story, then you know that Lancelot's pride in his character takes a great fall, his shining armor becomes tarnished as he falls in love with Guenivere

– King Arthur’s wife, and Lancelot falls from grace. War ensues and Camelot the perfect place becomes the victim of sin. It ends with a dying King Arthur telling a young lad, “Each evening from December to December, before you fall asleep upon your cot – think back on all the things that you remember of Camelot. . .” There it is! The same thought that Jeremiah had thousands of years earlier --, in the days of her affliction, Jerusalem remembers all the precious things that were hers in days of old.”

It is the song sung by Tiger Woods and all who have been unfaithful as they try to rebuild their life; it is the song sung at Penn State and everywhere where a trusted person is accused of abuse. It is the song I sang at the time of my divorce, and any of us would sing as we fail ourselves, disappoint those around them, fall from grace; and seek healing and forgiveness that cannot undo the past but can give hope for the future. The yoke of sin viewed publicly is hard to wear.

Of course not all yokes are of our own making. Often in the Bible we see how people have the yoke of illness or disease that and seek a way to lift that burden. And there are those who seek remove the unsought, unwanted yoke of grief and loss that can create depression and erode purpose in life. Whatever the yoke we find on our shoulders, whether created by our own hands or placed there by another, it is a burden to carry, a sign of servitude, a symbol of submission.

It was in response to these burdens that Jesus used a different image and brought comforting words of hope: “Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” “My yoke is easy . . .” There is another kind of yoke – one that takes some weight off your shoulders and shares it - - yoked together and sharing the load makes it lighter and lifts some of the burden.

Here is the wonder of the love and forgiveness of God, who does not ask how we got the burdens we are carrying or why we submit to the yoke of sin. Rather, God offers to take our burden upon himself. That is why, for Christianity, Black Friday has an entirely different meaning. It is not a humanly created event designed to make businesses profitable. It is a divine wonder that plunged earth into darkness on a Friday we now call Good. And in the blackness of human sin, Jesus took our burdens upon himself and offers rest for our souls, forgiveness for our sins and peace for our hearts.

That’s the gift he offers us today, as we lay down our burdens, take off our yokes and allow light to replace the darkness in our lives. Today Jesus comes to us and shoulders the weight of our burdens – as we let go of them in prayer. He releases our sin and as we light a candle, he gives us new life. That’s why even today, the Sunday after black Friday, is a day of Resurrection.

Amen.