

Christmas Inoculation

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Over the last couple of weeks we have been swamped with lists. Top Ten lists. The Top Ten lists of 2014. I am not sure who appoints who to come up with these Top Ten lists. I don't know what the qualifications are to determine the Top Ten of anything in 2014. We have the Top Ten movies. Top Ten songs. Top Ten books. Top Ten celebrities. Top Ten moments in sports. Top Ten. Top Ten. Top Ten. Along with all these Top Ten lists come a few dozen attempts by a few dozen authorities to list the Top Ten news stories. The Top Ten most important events of 2014. The lists vary, of course, depending on where you are in the world – but one of the few news events that appear fairly consistently across each list – is the event of Ebola. The spread of the Ebola virus. A humanitarian tragedy especially in the continent of Africa – but also one that has spread fear across the planet. The U.S. alone with its 320 million people – when we learned that one case had developed inside our borders – there was a great concern raised. The spotlight of public attention was trained upon the US government and its Center for Disease Control and the efforts being made to quarantine potential victims and to secure the border from any potential carriers. Airports were placed on high alert. Hospital staffs trained. Early warning signs communicated. The nation has been and continues to be on high alert. As well it should. Immunization is being rushed to market to protect us from infection.

Now what has taken place globally and nationally to fight this virus illustrates at a macro level all of what takes place inside our bodies on a micro level. The human body is an amazing fighting machine. The human immune system – and do not think I in anyway understand it – is this complex system of cells and organs and antibodies that are standing at the ready to mount an all out defense

against any type of foreign agent that appears to have entered the body. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week a war is being waged inside you to ward off anything that is not supposed to be there. We don't even have to think about it – the human immune system is working instinctively to repel anything that does not appear to belong. When Scripture says that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” certainly the human immune system is one thing that comes to mind when it comes to being wonderfully made.

Now when it comes to immune systems, global and physiological, one has to wonder if in some deeply spiritual and cosmic sense this is what we are reading about when we read Matthew's frightening and rather disturbing account of the events that took place in the wake of Jesus' birth. Certainly Matthew wants us to know that the event of Jesus' birth – though likely missed by the Top Ten list makers of the day – the event of Jesus' birth with a virgin conceiving, stars moving in the heavens, wise men migrating from the East and old King Herod panicking on his throne – Matthew wants to suggest to us that something from the outside, unusual and seemingly foreign, and most certainly threatening -- has entered into the sphere of the world. An agent from beyond has penetrated our defenses – and is seeking to infect the human race. “Where is this child to be born?” asks Herod of the Jewish teachers. In other words, where is the virus? Where might I find the foreign agent? Where might I best deploy the antibodies? And when Herod learns from the scribes that the prophets had spoken of Bethlehem – now all of sudden earth's immune system goes to work. And Herod unleashes the antibodies – and before you know terrible things happen in Bethlehem. To rid the world of the foreign visitor – Herod kills the good, the innocent. So threatened by the birth of the newborn king – the people's Messiah – the one named Jesus who will save his people from their sins – the one whose love will begin to infect the world with a gracious virus with no known antidote – Herod and his immune system attack anything 2 years and younger.

Now remember, Matthew here is telling us a big story – a cosmic story – about God entering the world in the Messiah Jesus – and while Herod stands in as the primary agent of immunization – the truth is what Matthew wants us to hear is that the world - not just Herod - has an immune system when

it comes to whatever it is that Jesus brings. We are on alert. We have readied our defenses. This child who will someday walk the dusty trails of Palestine and speak and touch and direct and teach – this foreign agent from a foreign kingdom will be met with the resistance of the human immune system all along the way. From his hometown. From his rabbinical colleagues. From the political establishment. From his own band of brothers. The world will do all it can to resist the foreign visitor. “Strap him up on a cross,” they will someday say – drive a few stakes into him – pierce him with a spear – do whatever it takes to rid the world of goodness and truth and love and grace and hope.

Now can I take a risk with you and suggest that maybe what you and I do in December – with all of our efforts toward doing Christmassy kind of things – peace on earth, goodwill toward all. Donations to the needy. Best behavior toward our neighbors and enemies. Hugs and holiday wishes. Is it possible that all these things we do and then grow exhausted from — give us just enough of whatever it is the Savior’s brought – but only enough to keep us from catching the real thing? That’s what an inoculation is, right? It gives you just enough of the virus to keep you from catching the real thing. Could we have been inoculated from Christ by Christmas?. That after we’ve stored that last bag of decorations and returned the last item to the store and have said to ourselves, “Boy, I’m glad that’s over,” that what we have in essence done is given ourselves just enough of the goodness, just enough of the truth, just enough of the joy, just enough of the hope – infected ourselves with just enough of the gracious contagion – that we have protected ourselves from the real thing.

Because you see this real thing, this real Messiah, this real Jesus – comes to us at the beginning of the year – and says follow me. God so loved the world that he sent his only Son – and the Son brings the contagion of his love and says, “Follow me. I am on a mission to love the world. But you see the world is on a mission of immunity against me – the world sees my presence as threat – sees my love as disorienting – but follow me as I seek to infect the world with love. Love God and love neighbor Jesus says. It’s the mission. Make disciples. It’s the mission. And what will happen when you try to do this is that the world’s immune system will push back.

If you fight for the little guy. The world will push back. If you advocate for the poor, the world will push back. If you sit with the sick, the world will push back. If you try to forgive your enemy, the world will push back. If you love your enemy, the world will push back. If you argue for peace instead of war, the world will push back. If you eat with tax collectors and sinners, the world will push back. If you suggest that maybe the Gentiles have a place in God's plan, the world will push back. If you touch the lepers, the world will push back. If you raise the dead, the world will push back.

Welcome, Jesus says, to the push back!

So can I challenge you today four days into the New Year? Is there something in this world you think Jesus came to do something about? Anything? It doesn't matter what it is – not hard to come up a list, your own top ten list -- hunger, righteousness, discipleship, soul saving, justice, evangelism, disease, homelessness – you name it. You name it. If there is something you think Jesus came to do something about – just one thing – choose it and join him in doing something about it. Give money to it. Give time to it. Give your talent to it. Redeploy your resources. Change your way of doing things. But do something about it.

And if you were hoping that this sermon wasn't going to make you feel uncomfortable, if you were hoping that no change would be asked of you, if this invitation and challenge for you to step up and do something new causes in you a feeling of resistance, a rising indignation, an instinctive push back – well then welcome to the human race. Welcome to the human condition. It's our immune system trying to resist. To keep the contagion of the Redeemer away.

But here is the good news: you can't keep the contagion of the Redeemer away. Because real love, once it's in the world, you can't get rid of it. Herod learned that. It never goes away. Herod goes away. The scribes go away. The resistance goes away. The Romans go away. But the love of Christ never goes away. The light shines in the darkness, remember? The body is still being broken. The cup is still being poured. There is no antidote for real love. No inoculation, once you

become an agent. Love is like matter – it cannot be displaced. Love never ends, Paul says. Follow me, Jesus says. You can't beat it, you can only join it.

So can I challenge you today? Can I challenge you in this New Year to think about one thing that Jesus came to do something about, and then do it? Love like Jesus loved. Resist the resistance inside yourself. Resist the resistance from the immune forces around you. And put up a fight. Be bold. Walk with Jesus into the fray. Let the contagion of Christ enter you and do something through you that will never go away.

You know the old story of the two guys talking and the one says to the other, "You know, someday I'd like to ask God why he doesn't end hunger, house the homeless, help out the little guy, bring peace to the world." "Why don't you?" replied his friend. "Because I'm afraid he might ask me the same question."