



Image: Holy Family of the Streets, by artist Kelly Latimore

At Kairos and the Freedom Church of the Poor we see the holiday season of Advent and Christmas as a time for revolutionary hope, a time to reflect on what it means that God is preparing the way to transform the world from the bottom up. This year Freedom Church, in collaboration with the Kairos Policy Team, have created a “Birth of a Movement” Fact Sheet. This fact sheet exposes the realities of suffering and injustice in our society (policy), shares insight (testimonies) from those organizing and resisting that injustice, and offers Biblical truths and analysis about the Christmas season, which counter the traditional narratives that are paraded out every year to reinforce the system that kills the poor and creates poverty. Taken together this fact sheet clarifies the intimate connection between these biblical myths and the policies and other charity-based “solutions” which actually perpetuate poverty, underscoring the need to organize our communities in a way that can understand and take on both.

We encourage all to use and share this resource far and wide. We also invite all to join the Freedom Church of the Poor online every Sunday from the first week of Advent to MLK Day, for a season of sustained activity and study known as the “Winter Offensive.” The Winter Offensive is an eight-week organizing drive inspired by and done in collaboration with the National Union of the Homeless and other organizations to lift up the plight, fight and insight of the poor, confront the lies of Christian Nationalism, and strive to “Put Christ back in Christmas”!

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Week 1: Ending Poverty and Homelessness

Poverty and homelessness in our nation, and world, are the result of policy choices, not individual failings. We put these facts next to truths about Jesus' birth - that it was a subversive challenge to the Roman Empire and that it is a story that calls for fundamental (systemic) reordering of the world which will be heralded in by the poor and "least of these," not Caesar. During this season, we celebrate the birth of a new way, with the power to transform systems of domination and death, and bring forth a non-dominating system of love and life. You are invited each week to use these facts, stories and images to engage your community in a discussion about these themes.

Questions for reflection: How has the Christmas story and the Christian tradition more broadly been used to justify empire? How does an organized movement from below help to counter these myths and put forth a different vision for the world?

**"Being poor isn't a sin.
Poverty is a sin."**

-Rev. Tonny Algood, Mobile, Alabama

Homelessness is a Policy Choice

Homelessness is an extreme expression of a system that has failed on many levels- denial of healthcare, lack of living wages, systemic racism, and militarism.

Did you know?

- Before the pandemic, 9-11 million people were homeless or on the verge of becoming homeless. This includes between 2-3.5 million people who were living in shelters, transitional housing or tent cities and more than 7 million people who lost their home and moved in with others.
- A full-time worker earning the federal minimum wage (\$7.25) cannot afford an average two bedroom apartment *anywhere* in America.
- At the height of the pandemic, 30-40 million people were at risk of losing their housing. With the eviction moratorium lifted, evictions are on the rise and could surpass pre-pandemic levels.

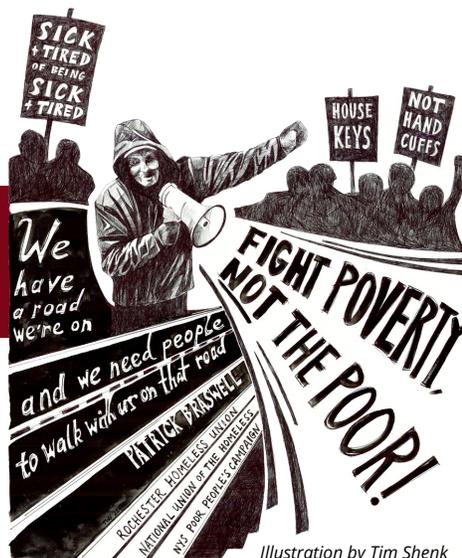


Illustration by Tim Shank

It says in the Bible...

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you" (Read Luke 2:7-12)

The story of Jesus' birth makes it clear that Jesus was born poor, to poor parents, in a deeply impoverished part of the Roman empire. The promise of his birth was delivered to and received by poor (homeless) shepherds sleeping in a field (Luke 2:8-9) not to kings and rulers. The story describes Jesus as a "savior," which was a consciously subversive choice of words; it was the same word that Roman conquerors used to describe themselves to those they conquered.

Not unlike today, charity was used by the Roman Empire to mask the deep structural inequality that benefited the powerful. In Jesus' time, Roman monuments and statues abounded with inscriptions of praise for the great charity of Caesar (eg. Res Gestae Divi Augustie). This helped obscure the reality that their charity was actually stolen from conquered people.

The 1968 Poor People's Campaign's Committee of 100 - Statement to US Government Agencies

"We come to you as representatives of Black, brown and white Americans who are starving in this land of plenty. We come to you because people who want to work can't find jobs....we come to you with a direct request. We ask you to eliminate programs that try to fit poor people to a system that has systematically excluded them from sharing in America's plenty. We say that the system must change and adjust to the needs of millions of who are unemployed and under-employed.... We have come here to say that we don't think it's too much to ask for a decent place to live in, at reasonable prices, in a country with a Gross National Product of \$800 billion. We don't think it's too radical to want to choose the type of housing and the location. We don't think it's asking for pie in the sky to want to live in neighborhoods where our families can live and grow up with dignity..."

Confronting the Culture of Empire on Black Friday

In a profit-driven society, human life is only valued as much as it is able to consume products or create value for the wealthy. Every year, on the day after Thanksgiving, Americans gather for a civic ritual that reinforces this theology of empire. For almost 20 years, Black Friday has been the busiest shopping day of the year and it traditionally signifies the start of the Christmas shopping season. While sleeping in tents outdoors is criminalized for the poor, it is encouraged for people who are camped out waiting for the next big sale.



Week 2: Immigration and Housing

The story of Christmas is a story of challenging empire. Jesus, who was born to poor refugee parents in a poor part of the Roman Empire, is cast as “savior” not because he will magically save us all, but because he reminds us of a way to bring peace to the world that is rooted in truth, justice and love for all people. This way rejects the way of empire that seeks peace through violence and domination, by building walls, militarization, and sowing hate and division among people.

Question for discussion: In the Christmas story (and Las Posadas) Mary and Joseph seek refuge and are rejected. What are some of the places where you or those in your community feel shut out, rejected, or denied access? And how does the birth of a movement address that?

Policy Violence in Immigration

For centuries, immigrants have been the scapegoats for political elites to blame the worsening economic conditions - all while they are the ones passing the policies that harm the poor and homeless.

Did you know?

- Immigrants contribute an estimated \$492 billion in taxes each year but are barred from many public assistance programs.
- Even when they were eligible to receive advance CTC payments in 2022, families with immigrant parents were less likely to receive them.
- Since 2002, over 5 million people have been deported by ICE. Over 25,000 individuals are in immigration detention centers right now, and at least 300,000 families and individuals are under heavy surveillance by ICE and Border Patrol.
- Approximately 1000 migrants die at the US-Mexico border every year. That's three people a day.



Image: La Sagrada Familia by Kelly Latimore

Testimony from the Community

“Our immigration system has separated more than 2000 children from their parents at the border since 2007. It has built more than 1000 miles of border walls and sent migrants to isolated deserts and mountains at the border, where they are dying at a rate of 1000 per year. That means 3 migrants die every day. It has pushed 11 million immigrants in the United States to live in poverty and ongoing persecution.” (Fernando Garcia, Border Network for Human Rights)



It says in the Bible...

“When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’” (Matthew 2:13)

Before the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph had to travel for a census, which was required to ensure more comprehensive payment of tax/tribute to Rome (Luke 2:1-7). The demand for tribute was a great economic burden on people and led many to flee their ancestral land and find work in distant lands. Joseph and Mary, who may have found work in their adopted home, had to return to Jerusalem where they were officially registered and it didn’t matter that it came during the last days of her pregnancy. This was what life was like for the vast majority of people living under the ‘peace’ established by Caesar. It is important to remember that the gospel writers intentionally chose to describe the birth of a savior under these circumstances and against these violent forms of control, in order to both critique that system and lift up a new way.

After the birth of Jesus, the Holy Family was forced to escape to Egypt, fleeing political persecution, as Herod began killing children whom he perceived to be a threat (Matthew 2:13-15). It was Empire that created the conditions to make the Holy Family refugees, and it is Empire that creates those conditions today for the Central, Caribbean and South American people who come to the US seeking refuge.



Week 3: Parent and Child Health and Welfare

During Christmas we are bombarded with images and feel-good stories of families coming together and the less fortunate being cared for by the more fortunate. For many the reality of this time (and most of the time) is much different. These myths around Christmas help to hide the reality of deep systemic poverty impacting all of us, but especially women, children and people of color. This kind of poverty and injustice won't be ended by seasonal goodwill, but from a movement of the poor and the revolutionary leadership of those most impacted, like Mary, who in Luke 1 declares that, "God has cast down the mighty, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty!"

Questions for discussion: In her song, the Magnificat, Mary tells of a God who lifts the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. Why do you think the true message of Mary's song has been suppressed throughout history? How do movements of the poor live into Mary's message?

Care Work Policy Facts

Christmas is not a season for charity, but a season for revolutionary change - to raise wages, expand welfare programs, and eliminate the conditions that keep millions of us poor, especially parents and children.

Did you know?

- Millions of families are struggling to find care services for the elderly and children. In part, this is due to the fact that care workers, who are over 90% women and disproportionately women of color, are vastly underpaid.
- Unpaid care work would have totaled \$1.5 trillion in 2019, at the current minimum wage.
- Ending poverty is not only the right thing to do, it makes good economic sense. Every year, child poverty costs our society more than \$1 trillion, but public assistance like a child allowance would benefit society by approximately 8 times more than its cost.



Image: The Magnificat by Benjamin Wildflower

It says in the Bible...

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." (Read the Magnificat, Luke 1:46-55)

Mary the mother of Jesus is revered in the Christian tradition. During Christmas time we often find her portrayed as a meek and holy woman whose only contribution to the world was giving birth to Jesus. We don't often hear about the community Mary comes from and how they hid resources in underground caves to avoid being taxed by the Romans. She and her family were revolutionaries. Mary was a young unwed mother and a powerful leader. When she discovered a new life was growing in her she felt the power and connection to God. Mary proclaimed how through her and the life she bore God would, "cast down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly."

Testimony from the Community

"For those families we organized with that were receiving the [CTC], it was a life changer. And we don't like to hear that a lot of folks were catching up on rent with this money, because this money is supposed to ensure that your children have food on their table, that they have shoes on their feet, the school materials that they need, and access to extracurricular activities that they usually wouldn't have access to. Using this money to catch up on rent is not a big win." (Kenia Alcocer, Union de Vecinos)



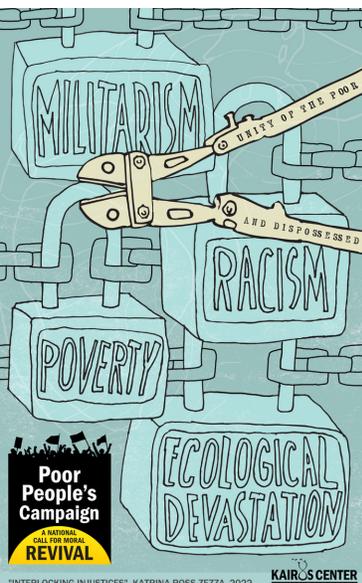
The hymn 'Mary Did You Know?' is a contradiction to the Magnificat

Controversy has existed over Mark Lowry's popular Christmas song, "Mary Did You Know." While some love the sweet yet haunting melody and the portrayal of Mary as sweet and gentle young mother, others argue that this portrayal erases the pivotal role Mary played in God's salvation plan. But on both sides of the argument, whether we decide the question itself is literal or rhetorical - this popular Christmas song that is sung in thousands of churches across the country and repeated on Christmas playlists - contradicts the radical song that Mary herself proclaimed in the Magnificat. If we listen over and over to the melodic lyrics of 'Mary Did You Know' we risk forgetting Mary's revolutionary message that the powerful would be brought down from their thrones and the lowly be lifted up. While many of the songs we sing during the holiday season are tender and bright and fill us with "holiday cheer," they distract us from remembering the true mission of Jesus and the Holy Family - to build a movement that would bring good news to the poor, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty.

Week 4: Pray for the Dead and Fight Like Hell for the Living

This economic and political system we live in is killing us. In the US (the wealthiest country in the world) 250,000 people a year die from poverty. Around the time of Jesus' birth the vast majority of people were poor (some estimate over 90%). It was a time of deep darkness where the lives of most were not valued. The story of Jesus' birth is a story of the light of God persisting and being ever reborn into the world to resist the forces that take and degrade life. During this longest night of the year we remember the great suffering in our land, the leaders who have fallen fighting against it, and the fighters who continue to take up that struggle today.

Questions for Discussion: How does a country have so much wealth alongside so much poverty? What are some of the common understandings we encounter in our society about who the poor are, what poverty looks like, and what to do about it?



Exposing Policy Violence

Empire pushes the homeless to die on the street or arrests us rather than housing us and confronting the evils of exploitation and poverty. Even on the darkest days of the year, we won't be silent or unseen anymore.

Did you know?

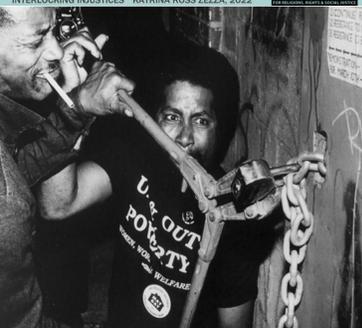
- Instead of providing affordable and safe housing, the response to rising housing insecurity has been to criminalize unhoused people. As of 2022, encampments are illegal in at least one city in every state. [Camping Ban States](#)
- Every year spent in prison reduces life expectancy by 2 years.
- On average, 250,000 people die every year from poverty and inequality. That's 700 people a day.

Homeless Not Helpless

"[Ending homelessness] can be done, if people take the initiative of breaking into these houses. Forget about it being against the law. I don't care. Hell, I'm dying in the streets. That should be against the law."

- Ron Casanova, National Union of the Homeless

(Left image) In 1990, Ron Casanova, cuts the lock off a HUD house as part of a coordinated housing take over that sought to build power among the poor and expose the housing crisis in this country.



It says in the Bible...

Part of the reason that the Christian tradition celebrates the birth of Jesus on Dec 25th is because this is about the time of the longest night of the year, the winter solstice (at least in the northern hemisphere). Gospel writers filled the story of Jesus' birth with images of light and radiance emerging out of darkness as a way to challenge similar imagery used by the Roman Empire to talk about Caesar. In Luke 2:8-14 we read of luminous angels appearing to poor, homeless shepherds asleep in the fields to announce the birth of a savior. In Matthew 2:1-12 a brilliant star shines in the night to guide wise men "from the East" (outsiders?) to the newborn savior. The Christmas story proclaims that out of the darkness (the darkness of suffering under Empire) comes hope. For them that hope came in the human form of Jesus - a poor person born of poor parents in an obscure corner of the Roman empire. This is who comes into the world as God's promise of a new way and as a condemnation of the way of domination (the way Caesar). The promise of following the way of Jesus was not a guarantee of happiness in heaven after we die, as many Christian traditions choose to interpret this story, but it was the promise of the possibility of establishing a way of truth, justice, and love in this world. "Out of darkness let light shine!" (Genesis 1:3)

"Pray for the Dead and Fight Like Hell for the Living"

-Mother Jones

Confronting False Charity and Compassion in Mass Media

During this season, we are accustomed to seeing Santa Claus outside of grocery stores and shopping malls collecting donations for the Salvation Army. And in movies, ads and other mass media, the Christmas story is used to reinforce that charity is the solution to poverty. Giving out blankets, having coat drives and serving hot meals are all important and necessary projects of survival for our communities, but they are not the solution for homelessness. If we believe that homelessness is caused by individual moral failing on the part of impacted people, then charity is the solution, but if we see that homelessness is caused by policy violence then policy change is the solution. This season is often seen as a charity drive but when we center the perspective of the poor and dispossessed, it has to become an organizing drive, because the way to change our conditions is through our unity as the poor.



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Week 5: Moving Beyond the Charity Model

The US is historically unprecedented in the amount of wealth it produces. At the same time over 140 million people (43% of the population) are poor or low-income. This glaring contradiction of wealth and poverty is not natural or inevitable. It is not the result of individual people working really hard and others making bad choices. It is the intentional outcome of a system designed to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few. As MLK saw in 1968, this system has spawned evil in the form of systemic racism, deep poverty, and militarism. Today we add to that ecological devastation and a false narrative of religious nationalism. At Christmastime we remember not only the birth of an individual leader, but of a new way of being in the world and with each other that will bring down these walls of injustice and re-build a world where all can thrive.

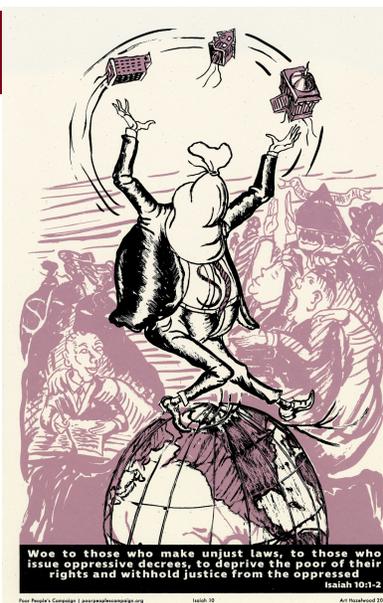
Questions for Discussion: How is God calling us to take action in the face of structural sin? And what sustains you in the effort to do so?

Policy Facts

While the rich get richer, more people are forced into poverty and homelessness. Billionaires and their charity won't end poverty, but fully funding anti-poverty programs will.

Did you know?

- Before the pandemic, there were 140 million poor and low-income people in this country, accounting for nearly 40% of the population. Although this number went down in 2021, that drop was due to benefits that have expired, and still one in every three Americans were poor or low-income. This scale of insecurity requires a massive response that goes beyond charity and philanthropy.
- During the pandemic, the wealth of America's billionaires went up by nearly \$2 trillion, most of which will go untaxed because the ultra-rich have rigged our tax code for their benefit.
- Charitable donations offer huge tax benefits to the wealthy. In 2021, more than two-thirds of \$25 billion "gifts" from the top 50 philanthropists went to private foundations and donor-advised funds, which have little accountability.
- Meanwhile, most pandemic assistance programs that benefit the poor have expired. This has contributed to rising economic insecurity. In the summer of 2022, one in five adults experienced food insecurity.



It says in the Bible...

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.'" (Read Luke 2:1-20)

Christmas is the day when Christians celebrate the birth of a savior into our world. The Christmas story describes a savior who was born poor, amidst barnyard animals, to poor, refugee parents, in an obscure part of the Roman Empire. The story of Jesus' birth was a story told by an organized, first-century, multi-ethnic and multi-religious, poor-led group of movement leaders who followed the teachings of a poor, brown-skinned palestinian Jew. The story was one way that this early community of Jesus-followers were getting organized and directly challenging the power of Rome and Caesar. Jesus born poor, is a message of hope not just *for* the poor but *from* the poor, for all of us, across lines of division.

From 2019 Congressional hearing on poverty in front of House Budget Committee

Rep. Bill Johnson (Ohio): "I see a lot of testimony here about Christian principles...I've been a Christian since I was 10 years old and I'm going to tell you about the scriptures that I read...because I don't find anywhere in the scripture where Jesus said that it was Caesar's job to feed the poor and to clothe the widows and to take care of the orphans. He said it was the church's responsibility, it's the community's responsibility, it's your neighbor's responsibility."

Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis: "Does the Bible say anything about what nations, what 'Caesars' are supposed to do? Matthew 25 says, 'I was hungry,' to the nations. Not to a church, not to a charity, not to an individual. It says, 'I was hungry and what did your nation do? I was homeless and did you cut public housing or did you start building new public housing? I was homeless and did you allow banks to be bailed out but families to become homeless?' It is a crisis when 250,000 people can die every year because of poverty....what are you going to do about it? What are you going to do about it?"

Confronting the Culture of Empire

In mass media, the Christmas story is often used to reinforce a narrative which says if we are 'good' enough, a wealthy savior will appear and change our individual impoverished conditions. In ads and movies, Santa Claus is represented as a magical bringer of wealth, rewarding those who have been good with material things, a story that leaves some children to wonder what they did wrong. In reality, St. Nicholas, a 4th century Anatolian bishop, used the resources of the church and his position as a cleric to free slaves and redeem debts of the poor.

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Week 6: Challenging the Religion of Empire

This week we consider the relationship between religion and Empire. In Jesus' time the Roman Empire maintained control and accumulated great wealth through the deployment of a religious ideology that justified the power of Caesar and his right to conquer and dominate far reaching lands and millions of people. European powers built tremendous wealth by twisting Christian religion to justify the conquest of the Americas and subjugate and enslave millions. Today in the US we see the forces of White Christian Nationalism on the rise once again and being used to unleash and amplify the evils that King and the Poor People's Campaign have identified: poverty, racism, militarism, and ecological devastation.

Questions for Discussion: In what ways have you noticed that Christianity shapes public policy in the US? How has religion influenced the mental terrain of American culture and upheld oppressive systems? In what ways are projects of the poor and dispossessed counteracting these forces to proclaim the Biblical message of good news to the poor?

Religion of Empire and U.S. Policy

Since the founding of the United States, empire has stolen land, labor, and the livelihood of millions to grow the profit of the rich. We must confront this theft and demand liberation for the poor and the land.

Did you know?

- The Doctrine of Discovery gave 15th century European explorers the blessings of the Catholic Church to explore and exploit lands outside of Europe. In the "New World," this sanctioned the widespread genocide, forced migration and dispossession of Indigenous people, Native tribes and First Nations.
- Native tribes have lost 99% of their land in the United States. Native and Indigenous people experience high poverty and low-income rates (close to 60%). They also have the lowest life expectancy across race, with a drop of nearly two years due to the pandemic.
- The legacy of slavery is evident today in persistent racial wealth gaps, unemployment gaps and higher maternal mortality and incarceration rates for Black people.
- Restrictions on reproductive rights hurt poor and low-income people worst. Three-quarters of abortion patients are poor and low-income women and pregnant people.
- Instead of addressing these long-term inequalities, since 2001, the US federal government has spent \$21 trillion on militarization, from war, prison, policing, surveillance, and border enforcement.
- The Pentagon is one of the worst institutional polluters in the world and a bigger source of fossil fuel emissions than most other countries. Military operations, including overseas activity, account for the majority of its most polluting emissions.

Testimony from the Community

"The USA is the most powerful nation on this planet, and yet so many forget that it was built by the exploitation of indigenous people and enslaved Africans and the poor who came as indentured servants. An enormous portion of this nation's wealth came from the cotton, tobacco, and timber industries, all of which were produced by the blood, sweat, and tears of Black and brown people, indigenous people, and the poorest laborers. Today, the gap between rich and poor is growing, because of the continuing disenfranchisement of the very people who built this country." (Amy Haugu Tai, Massachusetts Poor People's Campaign)

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It says in the Bible...

Although it is rarely lifted up during the holidays, the Christmas story has deep and provocative anti-imperial messages. While we imagine the moment of Jesus' birth as a "silent night," the reality for the vast majority of people was that the Roman Empire was profoundly unsettling their lives in violent and disruptive ways. People, like the early Christians, were coming together to resist the Empire, and the story of the birth of a new savior was part of how they did it. Like today, the organized poor were greatly out matched by the power and wealth of Rome and sometimes needed to build consciousness in coded form. In the book of Revelation we find a third, lesser known, birth narrative that tells of a woman "clothed with the sun" (12:1) who gives birth to a child who will "rule all the nations..." The "dragon" in the story is a metaphor for the Roman Empire which seeks to destroy them, but fails because the mother and child are protected by Michael, Angels, and creation itself (12:16).

Crossan and Borg help us see the true question that the Christmas story poses, "Are we supporters of the dragon of Revelation, the ancient serpent who seeks to devour the newborn child and to rule the world through intimidation and fear, violence and chaos, and to call it peace? Or are we among those who yearn for the coming of the kingdom of justice and peace, who seek peace through justice?" (Borg & Crossan, *The First Christmas*, 237-239)

Art by Ebony Watkins

