

Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2016

Pastor Katya Ouchakof

## Game of Thrones, Jesus, and the Syrian Civil War

*God of peace, help us to understand your word so that we might share it with the world in all we say and do. Amen.*

After some pressure from friends, including one of them lending me a set of DVDs, I finally gave in. I started watching *Game of Thrones*.

It's a very compelling story, even though there's gratuitous nudity and too many sex scenes for my taste. I guess that's what you get with HBO.

The basic premise of *Game of Thrones* is that there's a country that has been ruled by various families in the different regions, and now they're fighting to see who can rule the entire kingdom, with each family laying claim to the throne. Meanwhile, there's a group of folks who are not supposed to be allied with any one family, who are trying to fight off the monsters who live behind an enormous wall that has been protecting the kingdom from impending winter and destruction.

Dysfunctional fighting within and between families, with even more dangerous threats coming to them all from outside sources.

It's not exactly a happy story. But, as I said, it's compelling.

One of the most interesting things to me about this series is how complex the characters are. There's no single protagonist. As soon as you start thinking that a particular person is the true hero who really deserves the throne, she or he does something that you can't quite understand, that makes you like them a little less.

Now, to be sure, there are some characters who are more likeable than others. But there's no clear good side or bad side, and alliances are constantly changing. It's not like Harry Potter or Star Wars or a comic book or one of Grimm's fairy tales.

Many of our favorite stories have a blatant divide between good and evil. In *Game of Thrones*, however, everyone falls somewhere in between.

Perhaps this is why the series is so compelling. It's more realistic than many of the stories that we love. It would be nice if the whole world could really be divided into wicked witches and heroic princesses – and that's why we love our fairy tales. But real life is much more complicated than that.

Take Syria, for example.

In 2011, peaceful protestors were imprisoned and killed by the government, led by Bashar al-Assad, who is still the president of Syria. Some military folks rebelled against the government by joining the protestors and starting their own Free Syrian Army, with the goal of overthrowing Assad.

In the past five years, rebel groups have been reimagined a few times, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has joined in the conflict against them and Assad. The Kurds are fighting against ISIS, the government *and* the rebels. Outside countries including the US, Russia, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf states have taken sides. By providing money, weapons, and soldiers, some of these outside forces support Assad's government, some support ISIS, some support one of the rebel groups, and some support the Kurds.

Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2016  
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Sources include: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>  
<https://www.amnesty.org.au/campaigns/safety-for-syrians/>  
[https://video-ord1-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t43.1792-2/12005161\\_10153737525493410\\_415203821\\_n.mp4?efg=eyJbHiiOjE1MDAsInJsYSI6NDA5NiwidmVuY29kZV90YWciOiJ0ZCJ9&rl=1500&vabr=749&oh=b27fe98ca4c840efbff1cb6ffc57a984&oe=5853C726](https://video-ord1-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t43.1792-2/12005161_10153737525493410_415203821_n.mp4?efg=eyJbHiiOjE1MDAsInJsYSI6NDA5NiwidmVuY29kZV90YWciOiJ0ZCJ9&rl=1500&vabr=749&oh=b27fe98ca4c840efbff1cb6ffc57a984&oe=5853C726)

It's a complicated conflict, with more than two sides, with changing alliances, and with no clear "good guys" or "bad guys."

And while all the fighting continues, the folks that are taking the biggest hit are the civilians who have not taken up arms.

The first casualties of the war were peaceful protestors, fired on by Assad in 2011. This is what started the civil war.

In 2013, Assad first used chemical weapons against rebels – the kind of weapons that always kill bystanders as well as the intended targets.

And the violence continues to get worse. As you've heard on the news, millions of Syrians are displaced, who have fled their hometowns and in some cases their home country in search of somewhere safe to live.

And when I say millions, I mean about half of the country's population. That's a lot of displaced people.

And as you've probably heard on the news in recent days, people in Aleppo, which is the largest city in Syria (or used to be), are basically under siege and awaiting evacuation, but a series of cease-fire agreements have been made and violated and ignored.

Even those who are waiting to be taken out of the city fear that they won't be taken to a place of safety – because there are so many sides to this conflict, the place that is taking in the refugees still might not be a safe place for everyone.

What most citizens want is simply to be able to live in their homes without fear of violence or attack.

But the multi-faceted conflict in Syria has ensured that everyday citizens can't have what they want, at least not right now. While they wait, they are being killed or displaced or denied access to food and medical care while their homes and neighborhoods have become battlegrounds.

The Syrian people have been caught in the middle of the deadliest conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are experiencing war crimes.

The situation in Syria is dire.

So why am I talking about it today?

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Advent – the season of hope and joy and peace and love, during which we prepare for the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, as well as the coming of Christ again someday.

There are several ways in which the current situation in Syria relates to our Christian faith, particularly in this season of Advent.

First, and most obviously, there is a geographic and historic connection between the Bible and the conflict raging in Syria today.

Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2016

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Ahaz is a king of Judah, who speaks with God **in Isaiah 7**.

Ahaz fears losing his kingdom to a threatening army, so he goes against God's will and makes an alliance with a stronger army, from Assyria.

Assyria, of course, includes the region that we now know as Syria.

Ahaz's alliance falls flat when the king of Assyria demands allegiance from Judah, and eventually takes away their independence.

The example of Ahaz can teach us that compromising your God for the sake of your country is never a good idea.

And, at least as important in today's political climate, Ahaz's mistakes can remind us that Israel, Syria, and neighboring places have been in conflict for thousands of years. There have been long-standing struggles for power, alliances made and broken, and complicated conflicts that make it seem like no one is truly the good guy or the bad guy, but that everyone falls somewhere in between.

This is the political climate that the Hebrew people lived in, every day.

This is the uncertainty that exists in the Middle East, and specifically in Syria, today.

This is the environment into which Jesus, our savior, was born.

So, the first connection between today's news headlines and the story of Jesus is geographical and historical.

Second, and more theoretical or ideological, the current situation in Syria is connected with our Christian faith because God tells us to love and act on behalf of those who are oppressed. The prophets tell us that true worship is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. (Micah 6:8) The Lord's command to the people is to act with justice and righteousness, delivering others from their oppressors, and protecting the strangers and the powerless people in society. (Jeremiah 22:1-3)

In the Psalms, we hear that God is a stronghold for the oppressed, but crushes the oppressor. (9:9; 72:4)

Basically, the conflict in Syria matters to our Christian faith because the people caught in the middle are the ones that God loves – and they are the ones that God expects us to love. The history of God's people is full of stories about God sending some kind of salvation to the people when they are in their most dire need – this is the basis of the Exodus story, and even of the birth of Jesus.

This brings us to the final and most important connection between our preparations for Christmas and the current conflict in Syria: Jesus himself.

We are preparing to celebrate the birth of a child whose parents were displaced from their homes, who had to flee from government persecution shortly after the child's birth, and who were innocent bystanders in the political games that were being played in their society. Our savior, Jesus, has more in common with the civilians in Aleppo than he does with nearly anyone else you'll ever meet.

Mary and Joseph had traveled to Bethlehem because of a governmental decree, which is why Jesus was born in a stable. It was the only shelter available.

Jesus was a refugee as a child. When Herod issued a death sentence for all children born the same year as him, Jesus and his parents fled to Egypt to escape the violence.

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Throughout his ministry, and even through his trial and execution, Jesus was caught in the middle of power struggles. He was tried by the Roman authorities and the Jewish authorities, and by the masses, after being betrayed and denied by his own followers. Jesus was caught in the middle of multifaceted conflicts.

If we are going to celebrate the birth of our Messiah, who lived close to present-day Syria, in lands that once were ruled by the same empire – Jesus, who spent time as a political refugee, and who was caught in the middle of complex power struggles – if we want to show our devotion to this Savior, who gave his life for us and through whom we are promised eternal life – if we hope to honor the Gospel, the good news that Jesus is to the world – what better way to celebrate Jesus than to support the victims of the Syrian civil war?

The birth of Jesus is good news.

**Even Joseph**, who didn't know what to make of Mary's pregnancy at first, came around with just a slight nudge from the angel in his dream. He stayed with Mary and raised Jesus as his own son.

And until Jesus comes back to earth again, or until the day when we get to meet him face to face, as followers of Jesus, it is our job to continue his work in this world.

Heal the sick, raise the dead, and bring good news to the poor. (Matt 11:5)

Bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly. Fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. (Luke 1:53-53)

Help those who are in any need, knowing that by doing so, we are serving Christ himself. (Matt 25:40)

This is what the holiday season is truly about. Advent, as we prepare the way for the Lord, is a time for us to look around us, to find those who are in the most desperate need, and to give of ourselves until it hurts so that they can have their most basic human needs met.

It is what Joseph and Mary did for Jesus.

It is what Jesus did for us.

So in this Advent, as we await the coming again of our Savior, I pray that we all will find ways to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, shelter the refugee, and care for the sick and wounded. Especially those from Syria. It is our Christian calling.

Amen.