

Christmas Eve 2021 Sermon

Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

[In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.]

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Many of you have undoubtedly used "Google Earth" on your computer or mobile device. With this remarkable software, you are able to see the whole of our beautiful planet, with its white clouds, green and brown continents, and blue, blue oceans. Then you can zoom in to North America, then the United States, then Colorado, then Canon City, and then even see an aerial view of your own house!

The Gospel-writer Luke lived some 2000 years before Google Earth, but I think he understood the concept of starting with a global view, and then zooming in to the particular, the local, the personal. For as with Google Earth you can begin with a picture of the whole planet and then zoom down to a particular country,

and down to a city and further down to a street view, so Luke begins his story of Jesus' birth with a wide-angle view of the whole known world, and then proceeds to zoom in his metaphorical camera to a very intimate scene.

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that *all the world* should be registered.” The Emperor Augustus, supreme ruler of the far-flung Roman Empire, orders that a census be taken of “all the world.”

Now, Augustus had been adopted by Julius Caesar as his son, and since Julius Caesar had been officially decreed by the Roman Senate to be a **god**, Augustus claimed that **he** was the *son* of a god. Moreover, in the common usage of that day, the Latin word “*augustus*” was often viewed as the **opposite** of the word “*humanus*” – human.¹ Thus, in taking the name “Augustus,” the Emperor was making clear that he was superior to mere humans. And why does Emperor Augustus register – take a census of – the whole world? In order that his subjects might be taxed, and the Emperor’s treasury filled.

Luke begins his story of the birth of Jesus with a wide-angle view of the mighty and pervasive Roman Empire and its “son of a god” ruler: the very epitome of earthly power and subjugation. And then Luke’s camera zooms down onto the remote Roman province of Syria, where Quirinius is governor; and then his camera zooms down further still, to a backwater town called Nazareth; and further still, to a man and a woman, Joseph and Mary, who, despite the fact that Mary is 9 months pregnant, must, at the Emperor’s command, make the arduous 80-mile journey to the small town of Bethlehem. And in Bethlehem, Luke’s camera focuses down onto an animal’s feeding trough, a manger, where Mary lays her newborn son, because there is no room for them in the inn. On that first Christmas night, the Holy Family shares the plight of the homeless, taking shelter where they can.

Luke’s camera then pans the hillsides surrounding Bethlehem, where there are shepherds tending their flocks by night. Now in the culture of that day, shepherds were near the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder, and were considered a dishonorable class of people.² So we see that, in effect, Luke’s Google Earth camera has zoomed down, not only *geographically* – from the whole known world to the remote backwater town of Bethlehem; his story has **also** zoomed down from the highest rung on the political and economic ladder – the Emperor Augustus – to almost the lowest rung, where we find the homeless Mary and Joseph and newborn baby, and the nameless, scorned shepherds watching their flocks by night.

In telling the story of Jesus’ birth, Luke subtly but unmistakably draws a contrast. On the one hand there is the Roman Emperor, who claimed for himself the **title** “son of a god” and the **name** “Augustus” – as opposed to “human.” On the other hand is the son of the God of all Creation, whose name is Love; who, rather than seeing himself as *greater* than humanity, **loves** humanity so much that he enters

fully into human flesh, becoming one of us, a most vulnerable baby. On the one hand is the self-proclaimed son of a god, who *ruled over* all; while on the other hand is the Son of the God whose name is Love, who became one *with* all and *for* all – and who was not *self*-proclaimed as a son of a god, but *heaven*-proclaimed – by an angel – as Messiah and Lord. That angel tears open the heavens and appears before the terrified shepherds and says to them: “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for **all** the people...”

For all the people. Not just for the Emperor, or for Roman citizens, or for the descendants of Abraham, or for the wealthy or the righteous; but for *all*, including those bottom-of-the-social-ladder shepherds. By entering humanity through the womb of an unwed teenage woman living in a small, remote, backwater corner of the Empire, being born in a stable because there was no room in the inn, the Son of God is saying that he comes *for all*. By announcing his message to no-account shepherds, looked-down-upon by society, the heavenly angel *underscores* the words he proclaims: the good news of great joy is *for all* the people.

Now, did you ever notice those four little words the angel uses – “*to you* is born...” Normally, we would say that a baby is born **to** its mother and father. I was born to Morgan and Carol Meyer, not to the next-door neighbors or to some strangers. But according to the angel, Mary and Joseph are **not** the only ones **to** whom this baby is born; for the angel clearly tells the shepherds, “...*to you* is born this day a Savior...” The baby is born not only **to** Mary and Joseph, but **to** the shepherds, and **to** all people to whom the good news of great joy is announced – *including* you and me – here, this very night.

A Savior, the Messiah, born *for* all and *to* all.

And do you see what this does to Luke’s story? Luke’s Google Earth camera has zoomed out once again – way out! – to include **all** people, the whole of the Earth – even those *outside* the Roman Empire. *That* is the *cosmic* scope of Luke’s story! And we know from *Matthew’s* birth narrative that foreign wise men from the East, astrologers of an entirely different religion, also are included in the story of this newborn child. He is *for them* and *to them*, also! The love of God is not going to leave *anyone* behind, whether the **world** thinks you are important or not – whether **you** think you are important or not. God loves *all*, and God **especially** wants those who don’t *feel* loved or lovable, those who regularly feel like they’re on the outside looking in, those who feel forgotten, those who (like the shepherds) are looked down upon by society, those who are suffering or grieving or alone, those who have lost their homes to fires or floods or tornadoes or endless wars or divorce or medical bills or simple bad luck, those who don’t believe in God (or aren’t *sure* they do), and those who wonder what the point of life is – God **especially** wants *these* people to hear the “good news of great joy” that *God loves all*.³

Robert McCracken, one-time preacher at the Riverside Church in New York City, was once asked why people came to church. He thought for a moment and then said, “They come hoping to hear some word from beyond themselves.” “They come hoping to hear some word from beyond themselves.” Tonight, that word from beyond ourselves comes from an angel who tears open the heavens and says, “Behold! I am bringing you good news of great joy for *all* the people: *to you* is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

My friends, we are here tonight to listen to this “word from beyond ourselves,” because **this** night, of all the nights of the year, we can believe it is true. For on this Silent Night, this Holy Night, the veil between earth and heaven is thin indeed, and the spirit of God permeates the world.

You may know that on Christmas Eve, 1914, near the beginning of World War I, a war in which over 41 million people died, on that Christmas Eve in 1914 there was an unofficial truce. *Wikipedia* explains: “In some areas, men from both sides [of that war] ventured into no man’s land on Christmas Eve ...to mingle and exchange food and souvenirs. There were joint burial ceremonies and prisoner swaps, while several meetings ended in carol-singing. Men played games of soccer with one another...”⁴ Sworn enemies, in the midst of a world war, singing Christmas carols *together*, playing soccer *together*! **That** is the awesome power of this night! Of all the nights of the year, this holy night we can actually believe *it’s true*: that the God of all Creation, who **is** Love, was born in human flesh, *to all*, out of love *for* all, in order to be *with* us all.

Shakespeare writes of the mysterious power of this night in his play *Macbeth*, in which Marcellus tells his companions:

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is the time.
(I, ii, 157)

So hallowed and so gracious is **this** night when Love Itself was born *to* all and *for* all. This night, of all nights, we can **believe** it is true; we can **know** it’s true.

AMEN

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor>

² Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 296

³ Some of this wording is taken from David Lose, *In the Meantime*

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce