

Christmas Eve Late Service 2017 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.

The Gospel-writer Luke lived some 2000 years before Google Earth was invented, but he clearly understood the concept. For as with Google Earth you can begin with a picture of the whole earth and then zoom into a particular country, and down to a city and further down to a street view, so Luke begins his story with a wide-angle picture of the whole known world, and then proceeds to zoom his camera in.

“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 (whose birth name was Octavian) 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 common usage, the Latin word “*augustus*” was often contrasted with the word “*humanus*” – human.¹ Thus, in taking for himself the name “Augustus,” the Emperor was making clear that he was superior to mere humans. And why register the whole world? In order that the Emperor’s subjects might be taxed, and the Emperor’s coffers filled.

Luke begins his story with this 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.

But then Luke’s First-Century Google Earth camera shifts the focus east of Rome, and zooms down on the remote Roman province of Syria, where Quirinius is governor. Then Luke’s 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. The Holy family is, for this first Christmas night, *homeless*.

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

And in telling his story, Luke subtly but unmistakably draws a contrast. On the one hand there is the 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, **loved** humanity so much that he entered fully into human flesh, becoming one of us. On the one hand is the self-proclaimed son of a god, who *ruled over* all; 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, but *heaven*-proclaimed.

For in the midst of relating his story of actual, historical people – Caesar Augustus, Quirinius, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus – Luke relates an encounter the shepherds have with a being *outside* of chronological time and earth-bound space:

An angel of the Lord 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; but *for all*. 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 appearing to no-account shepherds, looked-down-upon by society, the angel *underlines* the words he proclaims: the good news of great joy is *for all*.

And did you ever notice the strangeness of those two little words the angel uses – “to you?” 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.

A Savior, the Messiah, is 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, and even the heavenly host of angels from another realm! 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 endless wars or divorce 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

And we are here tonight to listen to this message 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 spirit of God permeates the world, and the veil between this world and heaven is thin indeed. You may know that on Christmas Eve, 1914, near the beginning of World War I, a war in which over 41 million people died, there was an unofficial Christmas truce. Here is what *Wikipedia* says about that truce: “In

some areas, men from both sides ventured into no man's land on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day 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, singing Christmas carols and playing soccer! **That** is the power of this night. 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.

For on this night some 2000 years ago, an angel of the Lord stood before terrified shepherds, and the glory of the Lord shone around them... [And] the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for 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." The Son of God is born this night **to** all people, **for** all people, in order to be **with** all people.

And on this hallowed and gracious night, this Spirit-infused night, this Silent, Holy night, we **know** it is 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