

Sermon on Luke 2:1-20
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2011
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Tonight's gospel from Luke begins like this: "*in those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.*" In other words, the story of Jesus begins with setting the context – in those days the recognized power and authority in the world centered on the Emperor of Rome, Caesar Augustus. Caesar was the title for the one who had ultimate power, the Lord who was over all other "lords and masters"; like Hitler was called "*Der Fuhrer*" in Nazi Germany, he was "the supreme Leader". To call anyone else "Fuhrer" or "Caesar" would mean death. Now "Augustus" was the name which Octavian, the nephew of Julius Caesar, adopted when he became Emperor of Rome. Translated from the Greek, Augustus means "The One Who Is to be Worshipped." So in the Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus was King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, the one who was meant to be worshipped like a god (because, it was believed, the Emperor *was* God)! Most Romans had no problem identifying their Emperor as God (even though those who personally knew him knew that he was human), because this kept people in line. It helped further Roman power in the nations they had conquered, like that pesky little land of Israel, which they called Palestine. The Lordship of Caesar meant the control of Rome over everyone else; the peace of Rome was a peace enforced by military might – by the army and the cross. Anyone opposed would be executed.

This knowledge is key to our understanding today of what Luke was saying in the story of Jesus' birth, which we read each Christmas Eve. It is actually a very subversive message – there's nothing cute and cuddly about it! It's not for children's ears – rather, it's for adults only – for people of faith, willing to look at the world with different eyes! Luke says that during this time when Augustus was Caesar (or "god"), the Emperor decreed that there would be a census – all people would be counted throughout the Roman Empire. Everyone would have to return to their hometown, so that the male heads of households would register their names. Historians tell us that in the year 6 of the Common Era, Rome removed Herod the Great's son Archelaus as ruler of Judea, and replaced him with a Roman governor. As usual, there was an initial "registration", a census for taxation in the southern Jewish homeland, which was conducted by the Syrian governor Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, sent out that same year for this census duty. It was a way of asserting and expanding Roman control and influence.

So we read in Luke's gospel that Joseph went from the town of Nazareth where he lived and worked as a carpenter, to the city of David called Bethlehem,

because he was descended from the house and family of David (the greatest king of Israel)! Do you see where Luke is going with this? Whether Jesus had already been born (just recently or two years previously) prior to this registration census is secondary to Luke's point: that the son of Joseph's wife Mary was "the child" who had been expected and written about by the prophets. The prophet Micah said in chapter 5, verse 2, "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days....And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace."

And so, as Luke tells it, when Jesus was born in that Bethlehem stable (due to the census crowds), there was an announcement made by angels to shepherds in the hills above Bethlehem: "*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*" And suddenly with the angel there was a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!*" It was an announcement made not to Caesar's court, or to the high priests in the Temple, but to shepherds out in the middle of nowhere, hired hands in the hills of Bethlehem.

Luke called upon the prophets of the Old Testament, who foretold the coming of the Messiah, the Savior whom God would send to save God's people from those who occupied them with their armies and "lorded it over them." In our first lesson, the prophet Isaiah said, "*A child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*"

What? The prophets gave the titles due the Emperor of Rome to a *child*? These were dangerous, subversive words, written in the religious language of holy scripture and shared among the believers of a brand new faith centered upon a man who had only recently been crucified like a common thief (or worse – a revolutionary)! Who was this person named Jesus (which means, "savior"), who had been born to a peasant family, the son of a carpenter (who just happened to be a descendent of a royal clan), who had no other title in his lifetime than "Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, or Jesus of Nazareth"?! Luke had given him the title that should only be given an Emperor or King, words that would mean death for the person who spoke them, if discovered by those in power.

So when we read this story from Luke today, how do we recapture the subversive meaning that they originally had? It's hard to do when we usually tell this story with children dressing up in bathrobes, with towels on their heads, holding a doll and singing carols! We certainly can't capture the story with a

sleeping baby, a smiling mother, and doe-eyed animals gathered around! And as beautiful as the music of college choirs at St. Olaf, Concordia, and other Lutheran schools may be in their Christmas festivals, it could be that hip-hop, the twelve-tone harshness of Strindberg and Schoenberg, or the ungodly havoc of rock-n-roll may be more fitting to describe the world into which God sent Jesus (than lilting melodies, soothing chords and harps)! Maybe we just have to use our darker imaginations, and look at the world around us, to recreate the setting that Jesus was born into – a world not so different than our own (without the technology), but so full of disappointments and misery!

So when we open our eyes to look at our world honestly, we see leaders who seek to lord it over others, who would really like to be “Caesar” if they could, or love themselves like “gods”. We can see parallels between the Roman Empire and our own United States, in the power and control we have over peoples in many different countries around the world – with our military and with our money. We just recently took a U.S. Census in 2010 – and though we didn’t have to go back to our hometowns to register, we did register by households and give out some personal information – for the purpose of taxation, and the redrawing of political districts (so there is a “power purpose” for this, as well as any other census!).

As our military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq wind down, we can compare the “Roman peace” with that in our own world today. There were probably minor insurrections and revolts in the Roman Empire of Jesus’ day, just as there are civil wars and border disputes today – which have caused millions to become homeless, living in refugee camps, in jungles or deserts. In our own country, many have become homeless due to storm or flood, the loss of jobs and foreclosures on their home mortgages. Now, instead of people crowding their hometowns like Bethlehem in overflowing inns and stables, people are sleeping on their friends’ sofas, staying in motels, homeless shelters, church basements, and even camping out in public squares (in the Occupy Wall Street movement spreading across this country). Just as in the ancient world, too many people are doing without or surviving on less, while a fortunate few have “way too much” in comparison (hence the 99 percent are pitted against the 1 percent in political debate). But in the midst of all this despair, God gives us a word of hope!

Into our world today with its many injustices and feelings of hopelessness, God gives us a message through the scriptures, which we repeat on this night in church – while many are celebrating in their homes, or have already gone to sleep. Into this world where we live in a “false peace” based on domination by those in power over those who have little, God has sent a Son, in the person of a child, a sign of God’s eternal presence with us. The story of Jesus’ birth is a reminder that God comes to us in ways that the world cannot recognize, showing the true power of God’s mercy, compassion and love contrasting with the lack of mercy,

compassion or care that comes from our present human political leadership. The peace of God is in direct contrast to the Roman peace, which comes through violence and oppression, but God's peace comes through understanding.

That God sent the Savior of the World in the person of an infant child reminds us that the power and magnificence of this world's leaders is empty and fleeting. But God gives us a light in the world's darkness, because God has shown favor to the migrant workers and hired hands of the world (by making the big announcement of Jesus' birth to shepherds first!), by walking with refugees and immigrants (as God did with Mary and Joseph, welcoming strangers into Christ's Body, the Church (like Jesus did when he ate with outcasts and sinners)! Would that we in the Church showed such favor and compassion, walked with refugees and immigrants, and welcomed strangers so well! But the real good news is that not only God did this, not only Jesus showed welcome and favor, but you and I are also invited to join in the work of compassion, mercy, and love for others – today!

This Christmas night we celebrate a God who doesn't just come to earth through Emperors and kings, but comes to dwell with us, first as a child of homeless parents, then as an adult who crosses borders to give God's invitation of welcome to God's great banquet of love! May we all take to heart this message of love that crosses all human boundaries, and may it live in our lives today and tomorrow, so that everyone may hear it loud and clear! May the joy of the angels overcome our fear of God's presence in our everyday lives, as it did for the shepherds, and move you and me to go to Bethlehem ourselves to seek out that child in a manger, as we reach out to our neighbors to see the presence of God with and among them! And so in this way the peace of God will come to live in this world, the true peace that brings neighbors together and turns enemies into friends. A blessed Christmas, to each and every one. Amen.