

Luke 2: 1-20

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.

Psalm 96

O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.
For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
Worship the Lord in holy splendor;
tremble before him, all the earth.

Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity.'
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the Lord; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

Well, here we are. It's Christmas Eve. The lights are up, the tree is decorated. The stockings are hung by the chimney with care. Depending on the rules at your house, there may be presents under the tree.

Here in church, we have been preparing for tonight for four weeks. We have heard words of prophecy from Daniel, from Joel, and from Isaiah. We have heard a birth announcement from Gabriel. We have heard good news proclaimed, that a Messiah is coming to save humanity from the mess that we get ourselves into, if left to our own devices.

Tonight, we heard of a decree from the most powerful person in the world, Caesar *Divi Filius Augustus, Imperator Romanum*, that all the subjects of the Roman world must be registered, for purposes of taxation. That's why you sometimes hear it

said that he decreed that all the world should be taxed, and sometimes that all the world should be registered. It's different ways of looking at the same event.

Augustus is Emperor of the Roman Empire, an Empire that spans from Spain in the West to Syria in the East, and includes most of Europe, Turkey, North Africa, and the Middle East. There are so many people in his empire, that he literally has no idea how many there are. So, he is calling for a census. He wants to find out how many people there are out in the provinces, how much property they have, and how much he can get out of them for his benefit and the benefit of Rome.

Augustus is officially titled, "Son of the Gods," "Savior," and ruler of the world. It says so on all the coins, it must be true. Augustus' empire and the civilized, sophisticated city of marble that he turned Rome into are very real, but they are built on the backs of the provinces and the so-called barbarians. The legions brutally take whatever Rome wants, and destroy much of what they do not take. That is what makes Roman sophistication possible, in Rome. The provinces are poorer and less sophisticated, because, of course, Rome takes what is worth taking.

There is no such thing as democracy above the level of a town meeting. There are no such thing as civil rights. There is not really the rule of law, as we would understand it. There is only power, and who has it and who does not. Who is in the circles of power, and who is out.

Italians are in. Romans are even more in. Provincials are out. People born more than a hundred miles from the Mediterranean are barbarians, and, therefore, even more out. Men are more in than women are, no matter what racial group they are part of.

Caesar Augustus claims to be the son of the gods, and blessed by them to rule all humanity in just this way. And he has the legions to enforce his will, with violence that is as brutal as it is casual.

That is how the Roman Empire works.

But there is another way.

In a little town in the sticks of a small rural province way out on the edge of the Empire, there is another way. A baby is born in Bethlehem. This baby is the real Son of God. This baby is the real Savior. This baby is the rightful ruler of the world. His name, Jesus, literally means, "God saves."

This baby brings a message that is very different from anything people could hear from Rome. The message he brings is profoundly countercultural. You might even say that the baby is the message.

To explain this message, let me tell you a story. This story is not originally mine, it was written by a wise man named Soren Kierkegaard, but I believe that there is truth here.

"Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden. This king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. [He made Augustus Caesar look like a weak joke.] No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush any potential opponent.

“And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden who lived in a poor village in his kingdom. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist. No one dared resist him. But would she love him?

“She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind? Would she be happy at his side? How could he know for sure? If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross the gulf between them. For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal.

“The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend to her. Clothed as a beggar, he approached her cottage with a worn cloak fluttering loose about him. This was not just a disguise – the king took on a totally new identity – He had renounced his throne to declare his love and to win hers.”¹

That is what is happening here in the little town of Bethlehem. The unmatched king, the God who made Heaven and Earth out of nothing, has left God’s throne and come down here to Earth, because God loves a poor maiden called human beings.

¹ Quoted at <http://www.readingtheology.com/the-king-and-the-maiden-by-s%3b8ren-kierkegaard>

God loves the world, and each and every person in it, so much that God came down here, was born, and lived a human life.² He cried. I'm sure that he laughed. He loved the people around him and he taught them to love God and to love their neighbors.

Jesus came as a baby into a world much worse than ours today. The images we see of Aleppo, for example, are horrifying, and I do not wish to minimize them, but they are not new, I'm afraid. That is the kind of violence that the Roman legions called business as usual.

Jesus did not come to oppose violence with violence. He could have done that. He could have crushed the Roman Empire at a whim, but that would have been the king showing up at the cottage in his carriage with an army. He did not come to inspire fear.

Jesus came, and opposed violence with love. Love so complete that he even forgave the soldiers who were executing him.

And you know what? Love won.

That is the way that God loves you. Don't worry about deserving it, because you don't. I don't. None of us do. But God loves us that much, anyway.

Thank God!

In the face of that amazing love, let's love God back, and love God's other children. All God's other children. All our brothers and sisters.

Amen.

² John 3:16