

The World Changed
Luke 2:1-20
Psalm 96:10-23

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Pastor Doug Browne
December 24, 2018 (Xmas Eve)

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 96:10-23

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.

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus.”

In those days, the world was about power, or that’s certainly how it seemed. Power as measured by how much land you controlled, and how much stuff, and how many people. Caesar Augustus of the Roman Empire, the most powerful man in the world, wanted to know how much

land his legions had conquered, and how much stuff, and how many people, so he ordered all the people to go to their families' hometowns, so that his clerks could figure this all out.

Since the world was about power, those with power mattered. Those without power, didn't matter. Nobody even bothered to pretend any different. Caesar had power, because his legions would kill anyone whom he told them to. A twentieth-century leader with the same philosophy said that, "power grows out of the barrel of a gun."¹ Life was, as Mister Hobbes said, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."²

The God who created the world saw the state it was in, and grieved. God loves these human beings, created in God's own image. This was never what the world was supposed to be like. This was never what the world was supposed to be about.

God could have wiped out all life on Earth and started over. But God did that once, and promised never to do it again.

God could have sent in an army of angels to wipe out all the bad people and save all the good people. But that would be playing their game, by their rules of "might makes right."

So, instead, God lifted up a corner of the heavens, and slipped in a baby.

And the world changed that Christmas night.

That baby being born started something that's still in progress. We're not there yet. But it's happening. The world is changing.

¹ Mao Zedong, sixth Plenary Session of the Chinese Communist Party's sixth Central Committee, 1938.

² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651. Hobbes was speaking of "the natural state of mankind" without a benevolent government.

The birth of Jesus started something. There is a part of the world that isn't about power and brutality and death. There is a part of the world that is about love. Jesus called that part the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom started small. One manger. One stable.

It grew over time.

Thirty years after the manger, that baby was a man, walking around and talking with people. He taught people to love their neighbors, and even to love their enemies, which works out, because of how often those are the same people.³

Eventually the realm of Caesar realized that the Kingdom of Heaven was a threat, and they killed Jesus in a barbaric, sadistic way. But it didn't take. God raised him from the dead. The Kingdom of Heaven is more powerful than the realm of Caesar.

Jesus taught a different way of looking at the world. It's not about who is a winner and who's a loser, who's an insider or who's an outsider, who is honored and who is shamed. That's how you know which Kingdom you're in – Heaven or Caesar's. Look at the values.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, people are loved, and things are used. In the realm of Caesar, it's the other way around.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, you talk with your neighbor to make sure that you're both okay, and that you both have enough. In the realm of Caesar, you're too busy making sure that you're ready to beat him down or blow him away.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, leaders serve those whom they lead, making sure that they have what they need. In the realm of Caesar, everyone serves the leaders, and the leaders serve only themselves.

³ Thank you, G. K. Chesterton.

My sisters and brothers, truly I tell you, the Kingdom of Heaven is not just some place you'll go when you die. It's right here, right now!

It's just not very evenly distributed.

When we see the uncomplicated joy on a child's face when they know how much they are loved, that's the Kingdom of Heaven.

When people who have been at each other's throats can be reconciled in peace, that's the Kingdom of Heaven.

When we can eat together and talk, and know that the other people at the table genuinely care about us, and we realize that we genuinely care about them, that's the Kingdom of Heaven.

When the hungry and the homeless are fed and treated with dignity, that's the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom is still growing. It's slow, and sometimes it takes two steps forward, one step back, or even one step forward, two steps back. Sometimes it seems that the progress of the Kingdom of Heaven is less a victory parade and more a cha-cha.

But the Kingdom is growing, and it will take over all the earth. The day will come when "every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."⁴ That is not in question.

What's in question is what we will do about it.

Jesus invited those who followed him to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven. To do that, you have to love God more than you love your power and your stuff and your status, and you

⁴ Isaiah 45:23, Romans 14:11, Philippians 2:10

have to love your neighbors as much as you love yourself. You're not going to do that perfectly, but you can try. And keep trying. Just like the rest of us.

The reward is that you get to live, at least part of the time, in the Kingdom of Heaven. Not just after you die, but right here, right now. And you get to see the Kingdom expanding just a little bit, because of you and what you do.

What we're celebrating at Christmas is that Jesus came down here, was born, lived, taught anyone who would listen, and died to change the world. He was resurrected, and in the end, "everything that dies shall rise, [because] love is stronger than death."⁵

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.

⁵ The The, "Love is Stronger Than Death," *Dusk*, 1993.