

sermon-12/24/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“ The Challenge and Magic of Christmas”
Luke 2:1-20

Here we are at Christmas Eve once again. This is the night we read and contemplate one of the most beloved passages in all the Bible-Luke’s nativity story. To say anything is to risk saying too much. This story touches the heart more than the head. It speaks to the child in all of us. It is so familiar it is hard to really hear it from a fresh perspective so that it might challenge how we live today.

Let’s give it a try anyway. This time around, on this Christmas Eve, I would like to lift up two contrasting images of life this passage presents us. Commentators tell us to pay special attention to two phrases. Chapter two starts with the phrase, “In **those** days. . .” Verse eleven says, “to you is born **this** day. . .” Luke is contrasting **those days** with **this day** and the contrast cannot be overstated.

When he says “those days” he is talking about the tired, old, days with business as usual. For him that meant those days when the only ruler people knew was Emperor Augustus. Augustus governed by fear and oppression. You did not cross Augustus and remain safe. When a decree went out from that tyrant, the only sensible response would be obedience.

Thus, when Augustus decreed that all the people should be registered in their home town, Israelites had no choice. Even if you were nine months pregnant you had to travel over rough roads on a donkey. Nazareth was about 80 miles from Bethlehem. It would take at least four days travel to make that journey. Luke is presenting us with just how oppressive it was to live under Roman rule. It could be heartless and cruel.

In “those days” the peace of Rome was the order of the day. On one level that peace was a wonderful reality. It meant safe travel over the roads of the Roman Empire. But that peace was bought with a steep price. It was enforced by the Roman legions. Peace through force, through military might, was the peace they knew in “those days.”

We need to know as well that the Emperor was called various titles. We will recognize some of them. The Emperor was called things like Divine, Son of God, God from God, Lord, Redeemer, Liberator and Savior of the World.

Those living in Luke’s day knew all this. They knew very well what it was like to live in “those days.” The Jews especially knew what it was like to live under a tyrant who cared little for their comfort or lives.

In contrast, Luke says when Jesus was born, a new day dawned. In “this day” heaven was breaking into the world. The angels come to the shepherds at night with glad tidings. Don’t be afraid. I am bringing good news of great joy for all people. “To you is born **this day** in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Those reading this knew what Luke was doing. He was making Jesus a very direct challenge to imperial rule. The angel was calling Jesus titles only the Emperor should be called. Commentators say, to use any of these titles on the newborn Jesus “would be either low lampoon or high treason.”

But Jesus’ rule was to be quite different than Augustus’ rule. In this new day God would favor whomever God pleased to favor. You could not earn God’s favor because of being born into the right family, having the right education, or because you were successful. Even shepherds, those outcasts unworthy to be in polite company, unwelcome in the Temple because they were ritually unclean, strong, rough men who could defend the sheep against robbers, even shepherds could be favored by God. Even shepherds could be the first witnesses to this new day Jesus’ birth brought forth.

Instead of obedience being the response as it was to the Emperor’s decree, the decree from the angels brought curiosity, amazement, and pondering from the shepherds and Mary. This new day doesn’t want fearful obedience, guilt ridden obedience, grudging obedience. This new day invites us to explore our curiosity, follow our passions, and sit in amazement at the gifts God brings to us.

Instead of the Peace of Rome enforced by bloodthirsty legions, the Peace of Christ is sung by God’s multitude of heavenly host, God’s army, as it were. This peace is much deeper and more universal than Rome’s peace. It is not bought at the price of oppression. It is, as one commentator put it, a humble manifestation of eternal dominion.

This beloved little story in Luke is really quite radical and profound. As John Dominic Crossan says, this passage asks us some very interesting questions. Where do we find God in our lives? Do we find God “in the power that dominates from above or in the empowerment that liberates from below?” Do we find God “among the ruling aristocracy with Augustus or among the oppressed peasantry with Jesus?”

As we celebrate the birth of the Christ child this Christmas, as we take communion, the meal the man this baby grew to be taught us to share, let us ponder, along with Mary, what this means for how we live our lives and to whom we give our allegiance. If we want to live in **this day**, this new day rather than in **those days**, what does that say about how we fight terrorism, deal with the greed that has caused our economic crises, or work to make sure all have health care? Those questions are worth pondering **this day**. Amen