

FIRST LESSON: Micah 5:2
SECOND LESSON: Luke 2: 1-7
December 22, 2024
FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

“Among the Most Vulnerable”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Luke’s gospel tells us, “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.” There are some logistical problems with this statement, because in fact Quirinius wasn’t governor of Syria until the year 6 CE. He did serve in other official capacities, however, and it was easy for the details to get mixed up. Information was not as available then as it is now. No internet. What is important is the fact that Caesar Augustus was in control. The name itself, Augustus, means the revered or exalted one, and Caesar Augustus was widely hailed as the Prince of Peace, because his rule brought with it political stability and an end, at least temporarily, to war. The economy boomed under Caesar Augustus, and for conquerors and collaborators it was a time of prosperity.

Augustus was not a physically impressive man, but he was an astute and ruthless politician. He systematically destroyed his rivals and consolidated his power. We make much of Julius Caesar, but it was Augustus who was the first Roman Emperor. And there could not be a greater contrast of powers between this brilliant and ruthless emperor and a peasant child born in rural Palestine.

The purpose of a census was so taxes could be collected. They weren’t interested in any of the myriad of reasons political and social that we use for censuses. There was no money to be allocated. This was money to be taken. And this particular tax, was a poll tax, or head tax on each individual. Women did not have to pay this tax. Only the men did, so aside from the purposes of God, we don’t know why Joseph felt obliged to drag Mary with him, an 85 to 90 mile journey across rocky terrain, while she was heavily pregnant. It’s possible that she was being shunned by people in her community for getting pregnant before she was married and did not want to stay behind without Joseph to defend her. He had taken her home to be his wife, according to the scriptures, but did not have relations with her until after Jesus was born. But Mary was no longer with her family of origin. She was living with Joseph, and presumably his family. We are told nothing of these times, only that when the time came for the census she went with Joseph. And while we always see Mary riding on a donkey, there is no mention of a donkey in scripture. She could have walked. But regardless of all this, when Mary and Joseph did get there, Bethlehem would have been a mob scene.

We always have the impression that as soon as Mary and Joseph arrived she went into labor, and they desperately and immediately had to find accommodation. But that's not what Luke's gospel says. It says, "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room in the guest room." While they were there is the operative term. They could have actually been in town for weeks.

And here is the another fact that wrecks every Christmas pageant we have ever seen. There was no inn. Bethlehem was too small and too far off the beat and track to have inns. Furthermore, inns were basically no better than brothels, and no respectable man in his right mind would bring his wife to one. What Luke's gospel says is that there was no room for them in the guest room. The word is *kataluma*. Private homes often had storage rooms that doubled as guest rooms. It was expected that people would take in relatives, and even strangers, and temporarily displace the objects in storage. But unlike American ideas of privacy and space, guests didn't have their own rooms. They would have been crammed in together. The most likely place Mary and Joseph would have gone would have been to Joseph's extended family, but in this case the *kataluma*, or guest room was already full of other people. It would have been unthinkable for Joseph to come into town with Mary and be turned away, however. There was no room, but somehow room had to be found.

The original audience for this story would have been able to picture the scene that followed. In a typical Judean peasant house there was an area with a dirt floor, where the animals slept at night. That way they couldn't be stolen or wander off, and in the absence of a furnace, their body heat was useful. The family lived and slept in a raised part of the same room. Peasants didn't have individual bedrooms. They all lived and slept together. The guest room was either upstairs on the roof or adjoining the common family room. It wouldn't have been very large, no more than a storage area when there weren't guests. The lower area would have had one or two mangers with hay and water for the animals. In Bethlehem these mangers were generally hollowed out stone. They couldn't be moved. They did make a handy crib, however, because all you needed to do was put the animals outside, add a little straw, swaddle the baby in clothes and put the child in the manger. The baby would be safe, and mom could get on with her chores. Jesus was not the only child laid in a manger. This was standard procedure in a peasant family. It was convenient and it was practical.

So here's what probably happened. The guest room was small and already crammed with people. There was "no room." So Mary and Joseph were given space with the family. When she went into labor all the women would have gotten busy and shooed Joseph and the men outside. The men would have sat around the fire smoking, talking and keeping Joseph calm. In time-honored tradition Mary would have given birth in the main room of the house and Jesus would have entered the world in the presence of lots of people, and because it was night, quite a few curious animals.

This makes perfect sense of the story we have in scripture. When the first hearers of this story were told that Jesus was placed in a manger they would

no doubt have thought—“*Oh, I know where they are, they’re in the main family room!*” Why were they there? *Because the guest room was full—there was no room.* They may have even thought, “*Well, under the circumstances, she was probably better off in the main room anyway.*” This interpretation makes even more sense when we consider the shepherds. They were watching their flocks at night when they received word of the miraculous birth. But shepherds were from the lowest ranks of society. They would not have felt able to visit a grand house or an inn. But what were they told? “You will find the child wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” In other words, **this is a peasant home.** It’s okay to go there. This isn’t the home of some wealthy merchant or ruler. It’s a simple two-room house like everyone has.

Jesus was born into a peasant family in a busy, complex world. He came into a world dominated by Caesar Augustus, and we live in a world dominated by people like Caesar Augustus. His birth was nothing like the pretty pictures on Christmas cards that portray peace and solitude. It was noisy and smelly. People would have been talking and laughing, babies crying, fires burning, food cooking and animals settling down for the night. There was no room, so everyone just squeezed over and made room. He wasn’t born into wealth and he did not grow up in splendid isolation with plenty of time to meditate on the wonders of creation. He was born into a family, and he grew up in a household where everyone pulled together to survive. Our Prince of Peace is not a ruthless and brilliant emperor. Our Prince of Peace was born among the most vulnerable of society, in a poor neighborhood in a crowded house. Amen

Micah 5:2

² “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”

Luke 2: 1-7

1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) **3** And everyone went to their own town to register. **4** So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, **7** and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.