

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 9: 2-7
SECOND LESSON: Luke 2: 1-14
December 20, 2020
FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

“A Savior Has Been Born for You”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Luke makes a point of telling us that Jesus was born under the rule of Caesar Augustus and that the census decree applied to “the whole world,” even though it most certainly didn’t. Our English translation adds the word “Roman” to world. It’s not originally there. Luke was making a theological point that went beyond the empire. And he was not just locating this event in history, he was making a deliberate comparison to Caesar Augustus, the first emperor following the tempestuous dictatorship of his uncle, Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar chose Augustus as his heir, but it wasn’t handed to him on a plate. Augustus, known then as Gaius Octavius, was only 18 years old when Julius Caesar was murdered. But he turned out to be a genius at forming powerful political alliances. He wasn’t a jock, he was a brilliant nerd, more like a Steve Jobs, a Bill Gates or a Jeff Bezos. And under his leadership the empire gradually came together, warring factions stopped warring and a long period of stability and prosperity began. Gaius Octavius is the one who is credited with bringing the “Pax Romana” or Roman peace. He created an empire wide road system. He created the Roman civil service. He standardized currency. And he did it all with ruthless, smooth efficiency, patiently and systematically elevating himself and destroying any opposition until he was the only one left standing. To honor him the Roman Senate conferred upon him the title “the August One” or Augustus in 27 B.C.E. “August” means great or awe-inspiring. He ruled until 14 CE, a total of 58 years. **But this is the important bit**—the part we’re not expressly told because it was **assumed** we would know this. Anybody living at the time would know this. Augustus was accorded divine attributes. His birth was described as the birth of a god, and his birthday the beginning of good news for the world. Augustus had allegedly been sent by the gods to be the “savior” of the world. Of course, this was his own PR machine at work, humility not being a prime attribute of emperors.

Jesus, the true savior of the world, was born during the reign of Augustus, the temporal political “savior” of the world. It is an interesting juxtaposition, isn’t it? Luke knew exactly what parallels he was making. And he was stating that the birth of Jesus, far more than the birth of Augustus, is good news for the world. Jesus is the savior born for us.

The journey that Mary and Joseph took was about 85 to 90 miles by the shortest route through Samaria. We always see Mary on a donkey. There’s no

mention of a donkey. She could have walked, but walking or riding this would have been a severe trial for a heavily pregnant woman. A fit person can walk 18 miles a day if they don't stop. These people were used to a lot of walking. I'd be ready to collapse if I walked 18 miles! Suffice it to say, in Mary's condition the journey would have taken awhile.

The NIV translation I read this morning actually gets it right. When the couple arrived in Bethlehem there was no room for them in the guest room, not the inn. If an inn even existed in Bethlehem, which is unlikely, it would not have been a place any family would go to. Inns doubled as brothels! Joseph had family in Bethlehem. They would have gone to the house of a relative. But space was always limited. Sometimes people would clear out the room they used for storage for use as a guest room, but people slept side by side taking up every inch of the room! This was not a guest room as we would think of a guest room. And Mary probably wouldn't have wanted to give birth crammed in with 8 to 10 strangers there anyway. So instead, they were directed around to the stable, a partially covered area for the animals. And there Jesus was born.

Despite what you may have heard, Joseph did not necessarily deliver the baby. And forget those peaceful Christmas card scenes. Instead, picture jam packed streets full of people just outside the stable, talking, drinking, arguing and bargaining. Imagine the smell of manure, sweat and food cooking. It's very likely that word would have gotten out rather quickly that a baby was on the way and a group of women would have turned up to help. Joseph could go outside and pace while the other fathers gave him unwanted advice. The manger that baby Jesus was placed in after his birth would have been a sturdy tall stone with a hollowed out area to put the feed. Cattle and goats knock things over. The flimsy wooden mangers we use as props would last five minutes. And chances are pretty good that Jesus was by no means the first child ever put in a manger. Any mother who had to milk a cow would have done it to keep the child safe. Placing Jesus in the manger was just common sense. In fact, no one would have thought anything unusual about this birth at all if a bunch of shepherds hadn't then turned up with stories about angels.

The shepherds watched their flocks by night. The only time of year shepherds were this vigilant was during lambing season which happened in the spring, so Jesus was born in the spring, not on December 25th. December 25th was chosen as the time to celebrate his birth because it coincided with several pagan mid-winter holidays. Christians could celebrate without being singled out and identified. Everyone would think they were just celebrating Saturnalia. No need to round those people up and throw them to the lions! Saturnalia, by the way, included decorating with holly and evergreens and giving gifts.

We don't know if these shepherds were hired hands or owners. Probably they were hired hands, which meant they were a disreputable lot, not exactly the type one expects angels to visit. Even though shepherds were idealized because God was a shepherd and David was a shepherd, in practice no one wanted shepherds in the neighborhood, at least not hired shepherds. Shepherding was not a job people who had better options chose to do. People on the run from the law became shepherds. People with no respect for God became shepherds, because it was impossible to keep the law and tend sheep at the same time. They were almost always "unclean" because they had to deal

with dead sheep. Shepherds were basically “undesirables” in every sense of the word. It makes me wonder what Joseph’s family thought when a whole group of them landed on the doorstep!

The fields around Bethlehem often raised sheep for the Temple sacrifices because they were close to Jerusalem. Some of the flocks may have been owned by Temple officials. These particular shepherds could well have been helping to bring lambs into the world that would end up as sacrifices in the Temple, at the same time that Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, was born. Of course God sent shepherds! Who else could have been more appropriate?

We hear the story every year, but there are always deeper layers to be discovered. Jesus, the lamb of God, the savior of the world, was born in Bethlehem. He was born in humble circumstances amidst the poor. Gaius Octavius, on the other hand, was born into wealth and privilege. He was given the best education money could buy. He was chosen and mentored by his uncle, an immensely powerful man. And through his own skill and Machiavellian maneuvering he became the most powerful man in the western world. But Gaius Octavius, known as Augustus, is dead. He accomplished many things in his lifetime, much of which made life better for people, but he couldn’t actually save anyone. Jesus, the man born in an obscure stable, died and rose again. He is the one with the power to save.

We all want a savior. Many people are looking to Joe Biden to be a kind of savior right now, to guide us out of this terrible pandemic, to restore stability to our world. And the things we want are good and necessary things. We want widespread vaccination and an end to the pandemic. We want honest government and a smoothly functioning civil service. We want roads and trade agreements, peace with our allies and protection from our foes. But as much as a political leader can do, he, or she, cannot ultimately, be a savior. Only God can save, because only God can deal with the true nature of the problem, which is sin. Political leaders are sinners like the rest of us. Jesus is the only one who can save us from ourselves. And as Isaiah wrote: “Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.” Amen.

Isaiah 9: 2-7

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

³ You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.

⁴ For as in the day of Midian’s defeat,

you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
⁵ Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
⁶ For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.

Luke 2: 1-14

2 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.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

