

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – December 24, 2020 – Made Known
Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 and Luke 2:1-10

Isaiah 9:2,6-7

- ² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —
on them light has shined.
- ⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- ⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Luke 2:1-20

¹ In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ 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. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ 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.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before 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; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,

the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ 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.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Mary, the favored one, has arrived in Bethlehem where she is overcome with fatigue. For nine months, she has nurtured an infant in her womb. And now, following a lengthy journey, she awaits the greatest disruption of her life. “Those of you who have actually given birth could testify that, in a world without anesthesia or antiseptics, birth was more painful and risky than sweet and sentimental.” ¹

Mary was a peasant, young, and far from home. She had never given birth. And she was relegated to welcoming new life in a stable. Gratefully, both she and the child survive this ordeal. But it is hard to imagine a more uncomfortable setting. In my esteem for her, I find myself wishing that things might have been different. That Jesus’ birth could somehow be more comfortable. That Mary might benefit

¹ Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year B, Part 1* (Abingdon Press, 2017), 33.

from clean linens, and indoor plumbing, and quality medical supervision. But none of this was to be.

It's breathtaking, really, to consider how little Mary had - especially in relation to the significance of God's plan for her life. This scripture, like so many which preceded it and more still that will follow, highlights God's penchant for grand reversals. Here we find the strength of human empire and the power of God's providence in marked contrast. And here resounds the proclamation that nothing is impossible with God.

At the heart of Jesus' appeal is his humanity. He is a child from the community who "will lead the transformative process that will establish a new order."² In time, his mission will have real-world implications for all who are devoted to the causes justice and righteousness.³ That his leadership is unexpected serves to remind us that we ought never to underestimate others. Children, those advanced in years, and the poor each can and will act as vessels of God's disarmingly good news.

² Cristian De La Rosa, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume A*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 72.

³ De La Rosa, 72.

In previous years, I imagine that that many of you have visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. There, at this time of year, can be found displayed “beneath the great Christmas tree, a beautiful eighteenth century Neapolitan nativity scene. In many ways, it is a very familiar scene. The usual characters are all there: shepherds roused from sleep by the voices of angels; the exotic wise men from the East; Joseph; Mary; the babe – all are there, each figure an artistic marvel of wood, clay, and paint.”⁴

“There is, however, something surprising about this scene, something unexpected here, easily missed by the casual observer. What is strange is that the stable, and the shepherds, and the cradle are set, not in the expected small town of Bethlehem, but among the broken and decaying ruins of once mighty Roman columns.”⁵

To present the nativity in this manner is to make a profoundly theological statement. It is to suggest that “the Christmas story ought not and cannot be told

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Pub. Co., 1987), 32.

⁵ Long, 32.

without attention to politics and power.”⁶ And it is to affirm that “Rome’s long shadow falls over Jesus’ life from his earliest days.”⁷

Our second lesson this evening “begins with a historical mention most of us neglect to notice. Luke writes, ‘In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.’”⁸ The gospel writer has made the audacious decision to synchronize the history of the incomparable Roman Empire with the birth of a poor child in an occupied land named Jesus. Even more presumptuously, Luke envisions Jesus as the embodiment of “God’s promise that the violence of empire eventually falls under its own weight.”⁹

As Luke explains, the emperor orders a census, not for the benefit of demographers and sociologists, but “for the exercise of power, especially taxation.”¹⁰ Citizens and subjects in every age have debated the merits of various taxes. Yet, the vast majority of people in the ancient world were desperately poor. For them, taxation “was a burdensome imposition upon the many who lived on the very edge

⁶ Eric D. Barreto, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume A*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 79.

⁷ Barreto, 79.

⁸ Barreto, 79.

⁹ Barreto, 79.

¹⁰ Barreto, 80.

of existence. When Jesus teaches his followers to pray for their daily bread, this is not symbolic or poetic; it is literal.”¹¹

Caesar, to whom all taxes are ultimately owed, sits atop the earthly hierarchy. From his privileged position, the burdens of others are of little concern. His arrogance is on full display when “he calls for the whole world to be counted. Caesar thinks the world belongs to him. Caesar thinks he can move people from one place to another simply by demanding it. Caesar thinks his empire makes the world turn on its axis. Caesar thinks his word is gospel, but this little baby is about to change the world. This little baby is about to show us that true power comes from love and sacrifice and hope, not fear and taking all we can while we can.”¹²

We will forever remember the year 2020 as the moment when everything changed. When the routines and rhythms of our lives were disrupted completely. When we became unintentionally estranged from those we love. When we longed for the past in a way that we can scarcely imagine.

¹¹ Barreto, 80.

¹² Barreto, 80.

But time marches on. Empires rise and fall. Viruses rage and are contained. And what seems like an eternity is just a fleeting glimpse of the encompassing reign of God. Thus, when from the depths of our despair, we cry out for God's will to be made known, Christmas reminds us that God has already come among us. That God came to be one of us. And that God knows our past, our present, and our future. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.