

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer  
December 24, 2009  
Christmas Eve  
Luke 2: 1-20

Our Christmas story begins “in those days”. “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered”. “In those days”. What were “those days?”

They were the days when the Roman Empire was truly an empire, and controlled, really, all aspects of people’s lives. Things we even still know about: Taxes. Census. Authoritative orders of all kinds. Those were the days when Roman imperialism brought peace through victory --- through war --- through violence. Those were the days when Caesar Augustus was declared Savior of the world – in Roman politics, in history, in literature, in art and architecture. Octavian was his name --- and he was believed at the time to have been born through a divine conception by the god Apollo. He defeated Mark Antony in the naval battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E., ending Rome’s 20-year civil war. Soon after this victory, he was given the title “Augustus”, which mean “the One who is Divine”. Soon after there was a contest to decide how best to honor Augustus. The governor of Asia Minor won the contest, and by 9 BCE the League of Asian Cities made Augustus Lord not only of place but also of time. Here is their decree:

“Since the providence that has divinely ordered our existence has applied her energy and zeal and has brought to life the most perfect good in Augustus, whom she filled with virtues for the benefit of mankind, bestowing him upon us and our descendents as a savior – he who put an end to war and will order peace, Caesar, who by his epiphany exceeded the hopes of those who prophesied good tidings, not only outdoing benefactors of the past, but also allowing no hope of greater benefactors in the future; and since the birthday of the god first brought to the world the good tidings residing in him....For that reason, with good fortune and safety, the Greeks of Asia have decided that the New Year in all the cities should begin on 23<sup>rd</sup> September, the birthday of Augustus...and that the letter of the proconsul and the decree of Asia should be inscribed on a pillar of white marble, which is to be placed in the sacred precinct of Rome and Augustus” (from The First Christmas, by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, HarperOne, 2007, p. 160).

Those were the days – when Caesar was Lord, when Rome had a monopoly on military, economic, political and ideological power.

In those days, when fear, when violence, when oppression of all kinds was known and experienced by those who lived under Rome’s rule, including of course, the people of the Jewish province of Judah, “the time came for Mary 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 those days” – the expression is not one of sweet nostalgia. These are not “the good old days” Luke is remembering as he writes his Christmas story. These are not “happy days” he is recounting. No – these were the days marked by Roman imperialism. And those who lived under Roman rule were given peace, yes – but at a great price cost. The tax burden was great. Individual and community freedoms did not really exist. And Judah was, of course, not its own nation at all. It existed only through Rome’s mercy, so to speak.

So imagine, therefore, how astonished those shepherds were to hear this announcement from the angel on that night when they were in the fields, keeping watch over their flock: “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”.

The Christmas story begins “in those days”, and then moves to “this day” – and what a difference that move makes! Instead of Roman soldiers, there is a heavenly host of angels. Instead of those in power taking center stage, it’s shepherds, who aren’t even important enough to be included in the census. And it’s not Augustus who is Savior after all. It is Jesus, the Christ, the child born, not in Rome, not even in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem.

What a turnabout Luke makes --- and through his story people who have lived in darkness, people who have known peace only through violence, people who have had good reason to be afraid, are given good news. “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!. Peace, not through victory, but through justice. Peace not through Caesar but through Christ.

Nazi death camps. Stalin’s reign of terror. Mao Tse Tung’s cultural war in China..... Ethnic cleansing in Cambodia, in Bosnia, in Apartheid in South Africa. Genocide in Rwanda. The continuing nightmare in Darfur, Sudan. A wall between Israelis and Palestinians. Saddam Hussein. The Taliban. And so on. The Roman Empire’s way of doing things did not end with Rome, did it? The world has seen one form of political and economic darkness after another. The way of peace through victory, through war, through violence has never lasted.

And other burdens still weigh us down. Other forms of injustice are still prevalent. We know. Because we experience them. Because we come to Christmas with our own set of fears and troubles, don’t we?

The health insurance crisis. Disparity in education. Unemployment. Foreclosures. Bankruptcies. Poverty. Family struggles. Mental, physical, and emotional illnesses. Personal demons of all kinds. We know. And so it is to our ears as well that the

heavenly host sings. It is to our lives, too, that the good news of Christmas is announced: “Do not be afraid. For behold, I am bringing you good news of great joy to all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord”.

This day. A day that turns lowly shepherds into evangelists. A day that tells all the Caesars of the world that peace comes through justice, not through terror, not through oppression, not through bombs or battles. A day that brings good news of great joy to all the people. Not just to some --- but to all. Not just to those who have everything, and get to do everything, but to those who can't find room anywhere else, to those who are weary, to those who are on the outside looking in, to those who sleep in cattle stalls instead of comfort inns, to those who have just about given up on hope --- good news of great joy comes. And it still comes. A 21<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian Christian living in Jerusalem writes:

“Christmas makes us defiant. We defy the evildoers because we believe in the good which are they capable of doing, we defy hate because we believe in the power of love and forgiveness, we defy despair because we believe in life and hope, we defy violence and terror – both state and individual – because we believe in the power of peace and non-violence, we defy and challenge those who humiliate and degrade others because we believe in the dignity of every human being. The Incarnation took place when God took on our humanity, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....Then as now and in spite of all the hardships, we celebrate Christ's birth, Emmanuel, God with us, giving us hope, joy, peace and love. We are defiant. We are full of hope. We will continue to work for peace through justice”.

I'm hoping tonight that you find yourself included in the angel's announcement of good news, and that no matter your own situation, you too can defy whatever it is in your own life that works to bring you down and sense somehow the stirring of Christmas hope and peace and joy and love within you. I'm hoping too, that this stirring will stay with you – and lead you to be like those shepherds who after returning from Bethlehem, glorified and praised God for all they had seen and heard. That first Christmas wasn't a private experience then, nor is it meant to be one today. The good news is always meant to be shared with others. In word and song like tonight. But also in other ways --- through our gifts of money and time. Through acts of kindness and compassion. Through all efforts at making peace, practicing forgiveness, and doing justice. Through our charitable and volunteer work. Through laughter. Through mercy. Through love.

May your Christmas be joyful. May the love of Christmas live within you. May the light of Christmas shine through you. Tonight. Tomorrow. Always. Amen.

