

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2020

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus.” The familiar words begin the familiar story. It begins with power. It begins with control.

Caesar Augustus brought a time of peace through the known world—a peace that was often kept in place through brutality.

The people, those without power, hailed him as lord and as savior of the world.

Augustus sends out a decree and all the people respond. What else would they do?

Mary and Joseph, no different from anyone else, leave Nazareth and head toward Bethlehem. It would have been easier to stay put. It would have been easier, expecting a child, to remain in Nazareth, with family and friends and a proper house.

But they have no say in this, no say in what happens to them. Nor does anyone else.

Augustus decrees and the world responds.

We like to think that we are the ones who are in charge. We are the movers and the shakers. We make plans and build lives.

This year we learned that our control is tenuous at best.

A virus turned the entire world upside down. We cancelled trips and we came home from college mid-semester. We changed the way we worked, if we kept our job, and scrambled to keep businesses afloat. We put on masks and wiped down our groceries and let our hair grow and kept our distance. We watched and worried and mourned as those we knew became ill or died—and even more whom we didn’t know became ill and died.

Those with any grip on reality quickly saw that Covid-19 would not be stopped easily. Even now, as the hoped-for vaccines are being distributed, we hear the news of a more infectious strain.

We have no say in this. Nor does anyone else.

Covid-19 arrived and the whole world responded.

Following the decree of Augustus, arriving in Bethlehem, Mary, “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.”

This birth in a small village far from the imperial capital of Rome and even from the national capital of Jerusalem meant nothing to those in power. It would have gone unnoticed, unmarked, if not for this: shepherds received a message.

An angel, God's messenger, stands before them, striking the kind fear in their hearts that would usually be reserved for those falling into Augustus's bad favor.

Of course, shepherds should have been the last people to be entrusted with any message of any importance. We think of them as diligent, hard-working, "salt of the earth" kind of people. Up all night, keeping watch. But at the time when Jesus was born, most people thought shepherds were dishonest and usually suspected them of grazing their flocks on other people's land. Shepherds weren't to be trusted. They weren't considered to be reliable witnesses and weren't allowed to testify in court.

And yet, the very messenger of God tells these people about this birth and this child.

It is the birth of a Savior—not Augustus, the powerful, but this child, the vulnerable: a savior in a manger—not even born in a proper house or at least sheltered under the roof of an inn; a savior attended by ox and donkey, not the family and friends who might have been there to aid with a birth in Nazareth.

A savior is one who brings wholeness, health, well-being. I'm always helped by the words of Frederick Buechner, who says the word *savior* "means just what it says. If you're pulled out of water over your head, if someone drags you from a burning building, if you discover that life—your life—has a deeper meaning and greater value than you could ever create yourself, chances are you've found a savior."

But what kind of savior is this? This child comes into this world as all children, not in control. This child comes, as all children, dependent on the love and care and goodwill of others. That is to say, he comes as one of us, knowing the weakness that we know.

By faith, we say that this child, vulnerable and powerless is the very *incarnation of God*. As astonishing as it seems, God takes on human flesh, bridging the great chasm between the human and the divine. The powerful becomes powerless, taking on our human vulnerability. This is good news because it means that the One we call Emmanuel, God with us, understands what it is to be human; and understanding, empowers, encourages, and calls us into the future.

Look tonight and, along with the rest of this weary world, you will see in this infant Jesus a very human child, vulnerable as we all are. Perhaps this year we can see him more clearly, more fully, because this year we have learned again our own vulnerability. And perhaps this year we can see more clearly, more fully, that in this Jesus, God has taken on our human vulnerability, knowing life as we know it in all its uncertainty—and all its joy.

For behold! This child also comes as a sign of the hope and happiness that come into our lives through the presence of a child: God's affirmation of the sheer joy of human life, God's encouragement of our earnest hope for a better future.

Our own hearts whisper a deep longing: this child is the one whose birth announces that at the center of all existence is a love that will not fail, a goodness that will stand. This is the love of God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, shares our life and suffering, knows our fears and sorrows. This is the love of a God who desires our good, who will be our strength.

This is the Savior, who is Christ the Lord.