

Sermon at St. Thomas

By Lynn E. Cunningham

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Christmas I, Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20

1. This Christmas Gospel passage is so familiar, and so deeply connected to feelings about the Christmas holiday, that the reader can overlook the radical transformation wrought by God here.
2. The passage starts: “In those days a decree went out from the Emperor that all the world be registered.” What does that mean?
3. This registration helps implement the emperor’s political control over a huge area of the earth by one human empire, the Roman Empire, and Mary and Joseph are swept up in the tentacles of this vast power. Why is that important to Luke’s story?
4. The Roman registration and census were for the purpose of imposing taxes on everyone, for raising armies, for dividing all the spoils of political control over the land, and for general political control over the whole population. That’s what empires do. They control people. Why is Luke telling the reader about what everyone knew about empires?
5. Mary and Joseph must leave where they are comfortably settled and undergo the risks of travel on the open road to go back to his ancestral village of Bethlehem to be there for the imperial census in obedience to the commands of the Emperor Augustus. Augustus, note, not exactly a humble name. It is a name that implies political power and control over people.
6. Mary and Joseph are humble people, so humble that even in his ancestral village, no respectable place is found for them in the town. Left to sleep in a stable normally reserved for the animals is all they get. Why is Luke telling us this? Life has always been rough for certain kinds of people.
7. Luke is telling all this, because this is not going to be just a sweet fairy tale. Luke contrasts two kinds of people: on the one hand, the mighty emperor, Augustus, who rules over everybody in the Roman world; and, on the other hand, these two minor characters, Joseph and Mary, who have no place to call their own, no friends in Bethlehem to speak of, and are just following orders of the far away emperor by traveling there. Luke is showing the reader what some modern theologians have started calling the domination systems at work in the ordinary world.
8. By the end of the story, a baby has been born to these social nobodies.
9. But by the end of the story, something else has happened, Luke tells us. Shepherds, the poorest of the poor, in Judaea have been sent by angels to see the new baby. Why? Because he brings hope. The three wise men, too, have brought him gifts, again because he brings hope.
10. And everyone, Luke says, was basically terrified at this hope that the baby was bringing. With an emperor who can order the whole world around, with an emperor who can order lots of powerful soldiers around, with cruel governors around to see after the emperor’s orders, terrified is the natural way to feel, when a baby comes into the world to change the way emperors, and all their followers, control the world.

11. Luke has a few verses back before this passage given the reader a clue as to why he is telling all this.
12. Mary, a few weeks before the baby is born, stays with her cousin Elizabeth, and they talk, as women may do when pregnant, about the babies they are each about to birth.
13. Mary utters a kind of poem. The church has long called this poem the Magnificat. It was read this morning in the Advent 4 service.
14. Mary says some very powerful things, things that sound like the prophet Isaiah. She says:
 - a. He - the Lord God – has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts
 - b. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones.
 - c. He has lifted up the lowly.
 - d. He has filled the hungry with good things.
 - e. And sent the rich empty away.
15. Luke tells the story about the registration of the whole world as ordered by the emperor, and the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem in obedience to that order to showing how those words of Mary's in the Magnificat are being played out in the lives of real people.
16. Anyone, like Mary who sends the kind of message to the emperor that the Magnificat sends is certainly right to feel terrified.
17. But in fact, the local King, Herod, is also terrified when he hears about the birth of this child, according to Luke.
18. Luke, I suggest, wants readers to understand that God has a way of scrambling things up so that new rays of hope can shine through for the lowly, the hungry, the ones who have no place of their own. For you and for me.
19. In reflecting on what Luke is telling us in his Gospel, I remembered an old Dubois story told by Charley Beck. The story concerned some Dubois tie hacks. Whether the story was true or not, I do not know. It seems there was no dentist in Dubois in the early part of last century. Ron Custis hadn't even been born yet. Many tie hacks developed really bad teeth, and the best solution was to have all their teeth pulled. Many would buy, through the mail order catalogue, sets of false teeth. After a while probably most of them had a set of false teeth, instead of their own teeth.
20. It happened that one Saturday, the men decided to go into town and have some fun, go on a bender. They needed a break from chopping trees into ties all week. Strong drink and mail-order dentures did not mix very well, so the men set their dentures down carefully on a big table back at the tie camp before they left for town. Naturally, they got back to camp late, and promptly fell asleep.
21. While the men were away, some wag in the camp scrambled up the dentures into a big pile. What a joke! Really funny! When the men woke up the next morning, the dentures were all mixed up on the table, and no one could figure which set of false teeth went with which man. So the whole group went around the table trying on each set of teeth until they found the one that fit the best.
22. As Charlie told the story, "Many of the men that morning found that they were fitted with a better set of false teeth than they had ever had before!"
23. In reflecting on the Christmas story, I was reminded of this old story of Charlie's.

Sometimes God too really mixes up and scrambles the human ways of doing and seeing things. Think about this Christmas story.

- a. The ruler of the whole country, King Herod, says he is anxious at the news that there is going to be a birth of a child to a couple who are so poor that they have to put up for the night in a lowly stable. What is God doing, that the ruler of the whole land is so worried about a child born to a couple who do not count for much?
 - b. Or what about the three wise men? They are rich and famous enough to be able to stop in at the king's palace and have an immediate audience with King Herod himself. They are sophisticated enough that they can read the stars and make prophecies. They can comfortably travel great distances to come to Bethlehem. Yet they approach this little baby in a stable with awe and great reverence, and offer him rich gifts, because there is a different kind of power and grace about him that no emperor could offer.
 - c. The baby is visited not just by the three wise men, but by the poorest of the common people, the shepherds. If Jesus is going to be a ruler, he is going to be the kind of ruler that the world has not seen, a new kind of ruler sent by God, a ruler who does things differently from a political monarch, a ruler who brings hope of good things to the people.
 - d. Three hundred years later, the Roman emperor will declare himself a follower of that baby, the Christ.
 - e. Human domination systems do not last. God's hope lasts.
24. One can read Luke's Christmas narrative as a wonderfully crafted account of the start of Jesus' life and ministry. One can hear in it the echoes of Christmases past. All the beauty and tenderness and mystery of the birth of the Christ child are in this narrative.
 25. Awe and wonder are completely natural responses to this liturgy of the coming into our world of God as the person of Jesus, this Christmas celebration.
 26. But Luke's Christmas story is more. Luke is showing that those things that you and I have been taking for granted in our lives, in the ways that we have become comfortable with, may be broken up and changed, changed in ways that we may not at first like or enjoy, by a God who sometimes scrambles up the way human beings do things, to bring in new hope.
 27. Luke's story both tells about hope and brings hope. The hope brought is that God will always find ways in human life to bring about justice, equity, and good things for the poor and for all God's creatures.
 28. Now, suppose a friend comes to you for help. The friend is losing hope because their life has in some way become all mixed up. They are having trouble seeing a way out of their problems. How would you respond? What story would you tell them to give them hope?
 29. There are many Christmas stories to choose from.
 - a. Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol."
 - b. The Nutcracker Suite ballet commonly performed at this time of year tells a story.
 - c. The wonderful poem that begins, "Twas the Night before Christmas, and all through the house" tells a story.

- d. You could even tell them the story about the tie hacks' scrambled sets of false teeth, and how it all turned out better for the tie hacks in the end.
- 30. Or you might you tell the story about that baby, Jesus, and how God sometimes really scrambles things up so as to restore hope and justice in the world in new and unexpected ways.
- 31. In Jesus name, Amen.