**Christmas Eve 2018 Luke 2:1-20 Virginia Synod Service**

**Suggested for Use with “The Candlelight Service” from Augsburg Fortress, available online, in pre-printed packets of 100 for $8.99 -- item number ISBN 9786000069162 for LBW texts or item number ISBN 9786000168155 for ELW texts -- call toll free 800-328-4648 or augsburgfortress.org**

Luke's Christmas Story sets the humble birth of Jesus against the backdrop of a mighty empire and powerful rulers. Not much has changed …the mighty still seek power and wealth. But God has a different plan!

While Caesar Augustus orchestrates an empire-wide census, most likely for tax collections and army conscriptions, the seemingly insignificant birth of a baby boy to peasant parents unfolds in the rural Palestinian village of Bethlehem … the ancestral home of Boaz and Ruth and years later, King David.

**But for now, the "Roman Peace" Begins -----**

Caesar Augustus - whose name means “revered or exalted one” – has ended a long period of war in the Roman Empire and was hailed as a “prince of peace”, the savior of the world of his day. With his reign began the *Pax Romana*, or "The Roman Peace," built upon military might and marked by erecting huge public works projects. Under his rule, the economy was booming and Rome was rebuilt more glorious than ever before -- with temples, arenas, public baths, and forums. A new network-like highway system of chariot and commercial roads was built across the empire. Images of the Emperor and the Roman gods filled Rome and all the major cities of the empire, proclaiming "Caesar is Lord" and extolling his rule of peace and prosperity. You can still walk these roads today … even as Brother Martin Luther did, across the Alps.

But beneath the emperor's polished public image, however, was a much darker reality. Augustus brutally murdered any and all of his perceived enemies … even his family members. He achieved peace in the empire by suppressing human rights and liberties. Receiving the benefits of “the Roman peace” meant submitting to totalitarian rule. And of course, peace achieved by coercion and oppression is no true peace at all….it is same thing these days. The Bible states:

*"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered"* (2:1).

The purpose of this census was so that taxes could be collected from all the conquered peoples of the empire and so armies could be conscripted. And so a very pregnant Mary and her fiancé Joseph made the arduous 90-mile trek from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, the city of David, so that Joseph could be registered in his ancestral home town. Utterly insignificant among the countless subjects of the Roman Empire, Mary and Joseph were poor, weary travelers who could find no suitable place to lodge. Far from home and her family who might assist and comfort her, teen-aged Mary gave birth to her first-born, a Son, and laid Him in a manger, wrapped in rags.

On the surface of this story, it appears that Emperor Augustus is in absolute control, ordering the movements of people in far-flung corners of his Roman empire. Yet there are clues that another hand is at work in and through these events. Centuries earlier, Samuel had journeyed to Bethlehem and anointed the shepherd boy David to be king of Israel, even while the tyrant Saul remained in power. Now in this city of David, a special child is born to inherit "the throne of his ancestor David" (Luke 1:32), even while Herod, Quirinius, and Augustus ostensibly remain in power in the human realm of Rome. But what is this music?

**“Peace on Earth”…the angels sing to all those of good will.**

In the humblest and most unlikely of circumstances, a Child is born who will be the true shepherd-king, the true Prince of Peace and true Savior, who will usher in God's reign on earth, as it is in heaven. The peace He brings will come not from military might, but from justice and mercy. He will rule not with coercive force, but with the power of His self-giving love.

It is strangely appropriate that the news of this royal birth comes first to some poor shepherds -- among the lowliest of the emperor's subjects. We tend to romanticize those "shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night," but in the first century, shepherds were not considered desirable company. They were poor, illiterate, raggedy folks, unclean, sickly, and thought to be dishonorable because they could not be home at night to protect their women. They were also considered thieves because they grazed their flocks on fields of other people's property. They were outcasts of polite society, usually ranked together with sailors, butchers, camel drivers, and other despised low life occupations.

Yet it is precisely to these unlikely folk that the angel & chorus announce: "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" (2:10-11). A fully divine child is born as a true human being! The news of Jesus' birth is meant for *all* the people -- not just the powerful and elite, but *all* the people, especially the lowly and outcast. The shepherds go to Bethlehem to find this new baby, and become the first to share the good news of the Savior's birth.

In Luke 1, Mary sang of God “bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly” (1:52). In the Messiah's humble birth and the shepherds receiving and sharing the Good News, we can see the lowly being lifted up. It will be some time before the old Caesar is brought down from his throne, but that day will come, as it will for all the tyrants and power-hungry emperors after him. So, Mary's child will "reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (1:33).

**Good News of Great Joy for all people**

We live in a world still dominated by little Caesars…and I don’t mean just the pizza stores … (PIZZA< PIZZA<). Ours is a world still enamored with wealth, power, and military might, a world where the lowly still get trampled far too often and far too flat. Yet recently we have seen some of those little Caesars fall. We have been reminded that, one way or another, the rule of every tyrant eventually comes to an ignominious end.

Lest we become smug, we are reminded that our “personal empires” too will pass away -- all the things we hold onto so tightly, all the ways in which we seek power OVER others instead of FOR others, all our relentless planning and maneuvering that never brings true peace or security to us or to the earth.

We can no longer delude ourselves into thinking that we are the “lords over our own lives”, for God's anointed One, the Savior and Lord, has arrived among us … and He even plans to meet us again.

We pause, as we celebrate the Messiah's birth tonight, here in this congregation (and among those cooperating churches represented here) and throughout the Virginia Synod, in Candlelight, with Carols, (with Holy Communion, and perhaps in Children’s Baptisms), in our homes that are replete with Christmas cookies, Christmas gifts, and Christmas decorations. We notice that others are peering through flooded windows and doorways, fleeing forest fires flames, or standing with fragile dreams at the border lines dividing nations. We recall that Jesus, too, was really a refugee … he was numbered among displaced persons in Egypt, when Caesar Augustus’ merciless thugs actually came to Bethlehem … Jesus and his parents had escaped, as many displaced refugees still flee oppression even now.

This Savior is born FOR us, even gathered many centuries later, and his birth is good news for all people of good will. He comes to bring peace on earth by reconciling us to God and to one another with the power of the perfect love that casts out fear. His reign continues to break into our world wherever the lowly are lifted up -- wherever the outcast are welcomed, wherever the hungry are fed, wherever the poor are clothed and sheltered, wherever the captives are set free, wherever enemies are reconciled, wherever the good news is proclaimed, sins are forgiven, and people’s lives are transformed by God’s grace.

God’s gifts are meant for ALL people … given through Jesus to all … he truly is the best Christmas gift of all for all.

We look forward to the better and brighter day when His reign of justice, mercy, and peace on earth will come in all its fullness to all those of good will and shall fulfill the glorious announcement of the angels.

MAY THE THINGS THAT DIVIDE US, YIELD TO HIM who unites us – the Babe of Bethlehem.

Amen, come Lord Jesus … Amen!

Votum / Closing Blessing: “May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the blessed Christ … born for the whole world … this night in Bethlehem … and by Baptism and grace into our lives!”

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