

Christmas Eve 2021 – Luke 2:1-20

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Unease, anxiety, fear, oppression, poverty,

concerns over safety and the economy, so much disease and death,

hatred of particular religious groups and others, divisiveness,

violence, injustice, inequality, huge gaps in wealth and in social status.

Sounds like one way of describing our world today.

But I'm actually talking about the world into which the baby Jesus was born.

Luke reminds us that Jesus was born at the time of Emperor Augustus.

This time in history was considered a time of great peace;

however, that peace was often maintained

with exceptional violence and fear-mongering.

The Roman Empire was a master of maintaining the status quo

by instilling fear in its citizens.

Few resisted the machine of Empire

because of the horrific consequences for oneself and one's family.

And yet, the Jews in Judea – the people who were Jesus' family, friends and neighbors –

had been resisting Rome for decades.

Often their resistance led to even greater oppression

which then resulted in even more fear.

The Empire ruled all with a heavy hand.

Life was precarious and scary. Life was unjust and often unkind.

People were anxious and afraid – and also divided on how to make things better.

This is the world Luke tells us of in his account of Jesus' birth.

The story of Jesus' birth begins with Mary and Joseph

compelled by the Empire to journey to Bethlehem to be "registered."

Other than the unmistakable presence of the Roman military throughout Judea,

there was no stronger symbol of the Roman Empire's power over its subjects

than a registration.

First, a census itself was seen by Jews as highly offensive –

since as the people of Israel they belonged to God

and only God has the right to number them.

Second, the main reason for the registration

was to serve the oppressive and exploitive taxation system of the Empire.

So it's not surprising that, according to the historian Josephus,

the census carried out under the Roman governor Quirinius

sparked a violent revolt in Galilee.

The census – which might seem like a strange detail

in a quaint story of mangers, farm animals, shepherds and angels –

is actually really important.

Luke tells us of the census because it sets up the conflict
between the reality of the world at the time of Jesus –
so much fear, oppression, violence, injustice –
and the great gift of peace, love, life, and hope
which has come in this tiny child named Jesus.

It is absolutely essential that we do not lose sight
of the magnificence and awesomeness – as well as the shockingness and radicalness –
of the birth of Jesus!!

So often this Christmas story gets watered down
to a sublimely sweet story of a silent and holy night
with the little lord Jesus, no crying he makes.

But this story is not a Hallmark card nor an idyllic painting.
This story is not a Christmas carol nor a backdrop for gift-giving.
This story is not even, as the Grinch himself discovered,
about the beauty of being with people we love.

Luke's story is beautiful – don't get me wrong.
But the gift of Christmas is more than a sentimentality.
It is also more than personal salvation.

As much as I love Christmas carols and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* –

and I LOVE carols and the Grinch! –

Christmas is more than silent night, or joy to the world,

or angels we have heard on high,

or “Christmas Day is in our grasp so long as we have hands to clasp.”

Christmas is more than family, more than presents, more than ham,

more than candles and trees and lights and songs and gifts.

Luke’s beautiful story of the birth of Jesus

starts with the stark reminder that God breaks into our world!!

Our actual real world – with angst and fear and injustice and grief.

God breaks into our world in the person of Jesus.

That is radical, phenomenal, glorious good news!!

God has come into the world in the birth of Jesus.

And not in some abstract way or some abstract time

but in the midst of life in the Roman Empire.

God first came to live in our world in a tiny child,

born to a poor family,

living under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire,

surrounded by the threat of violence and fear.

That is the world into which God was born! The real world!

Not a Christmas card world, but the real world, our world!

And this is the world in which God still present today!

God is here – in our real world! Right now!

Right where you live and work and play,

right where you are gathered for worship –

whether in a sanctuary, outside, at home, online, or elsewhere –

God is present!

That is radical, phenomenal, glorious, good news!

Because that news means – as it meant nearly 2000 years ago –

that God cares about the world in which we live!

God is active in the world in which we live.

God is present in the world in which we live!

God is making all things new –

right here and now in the world in which we live!

God is with us!

That is meaning of Emmanuel – God is with us!

And not in some figurative, fictional way – but with us in flesh and blood!

God continues to be with us now – in and through one another!

Do you want to see one way I know that God is with us today?

Turn to your neighbor!

Or look at the people and names on the screen, if you are joining worship online.

Seriously, look at the people around you.

That person is a reflection of God's love and grace.

God is working in and through that person

to continue to bring peace, joy, love, mercy,

compassion and hope into our world.

God is with us!

Yes, we live in a world that – like the Roman Empire –

is filled with unease, anxiety, fear, oppression, poverty,

concerns over safety and the economy, so much disease and death,

hatred of particular religious groups and other, divisiveness,

violence, injustice, inequality, huge gaps in wealth and in social status.

And just as God was present 2000 years ago in the midst of Empire,

God is still present today right here with us

in the midst of our empires of injustice, hatred, violence and fear.

God still cares about our world!

God cares so much that God comes to be with us, to be one of us.

To turn our world around, to make our lives new,

To show mercy to everyone,

To show the strength of God's mighty arm

In scattering those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations

In pulling the powerful down from their thrones

In lifting up the lowly

God has come to fill the hungry with good things

and to send the rich away empty-handed.

God has come to our aid, just as God has promised for generations.

to tear down systems of injustice and oppression,

to disrupt systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia,

to topple empires of greed and consumerism and inequality,

to restore health and wellness and wholeness

to a world still suffering in a pandemic,

to bring peace to our hurting creation,

to forgive our divisions and to heal us as Christ's body,

to grant each of us and ALL of us abundant life

in which we each have agency and autonomy

to live the lives God hopes and plans for us.

God is with us! God is making all things new!

That is radical good news!

No wonder the shepherds with freaking out a little!

God is with us!

So know that in the midst of the silent nights of sadness and anxiety,

God is with us!

In the midst of life's crushing load and painful steps and slow,

God is with us!

In the midst of the joy to world as meals are shared and gifts are opened,

God is with us!

In the midst of the dark streets of fear which inhabit our hearts,

God is with us!

In the midst of coming together, all ye faithful,

God is with us!

In the midst of those with no crib for a bed,

God is with us!

In the midst of bells ringing and tidings bringing,

God is with us!

God is with us! Glory to God in the highest

and peace among all people whom God favors!

So, as those who sing this night of the first Noel,

as those who raise our song on high,

as those who repeat the sounding joy,

as those who follow Jesus,

let us live as reflections of God's holy presence in our world.

Let us be joy, peace, love, and hope. Let us be Christ to our neighbor.

Because Jesus Christ IS joy, peace, love, and hope – so much hope!!

Hope that quells our fear!

Hope that fills our hearts!

Hope that lifts our joy!

Hope that is active in our world – in and through each of you!

God is with us! Thanks be to God! And joy to world!

Merry Christmas!

Amen.