

## **Christmas Eve – Nativity of our Lord**

**December 24, 2022**

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

Psalm 96

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Luke's is perhaps the most familiar Christmas Story ever told. Mary, a peasant girl from Nazareth is visited by an angel who declares her favored and announces the divine origins of her impossible pregnancy. Mary recognized in this announcement a fulfillment of the prophetic longing for justice in Israel's traditions and histories about God's promises of liberation and salvation, praising God for this child in whom the world would be turned upside down. Due to an imperial decree obliging Mary and her betrothed to register in an empire-wide census, they travel to Bethlehem only to find themselves in a guestroom shared by animals bed down on hay and Mary in the throes of labor. There, in the most unassuming and humble context, a child was born. Angels burst into the quiet sky over a field with shepherds, announcing the birth of this child and the peace he will bring to the peoples of the world.

The familiarity of this Christmas story leaves us prone to miss the scandal of the incarnation, which is found not so much in the sanitized version of this story portrayed in greeting cards and pageants but in the details of "those days" with which Luke begins to narrate this story. More than simply pointing to a date on a calendar or dot on some one-dimensional timeline, he means for his hearers and readers to recall the circumstances of "those days" – evoking time as a qualitative experience of fullness and expectation rather than the ticking of a clock.

The days that Luke writes about are those experienced under Emperor Augustus. An ancient inscription lauds him the savior of the world who brought peace and an end to the state of war in the Mediterranean region. But the peace of Rome was not achieved through legislating tolerance or diplomatically honoring difference. Instead, conquered peoples were compelled to abide by Rome's peace through forced displacement and assimilation, and through oppressive class systems that left people like Mary and Joseph bound to the whims of imperial command. So, when the emperor demanded a census of the "whole world," they had little choice but to oblige, no matter Mary's very pregnant condition. Time must have felt so strange to her – carrying and pondering in her heart the vision of the angel, even as she carried in her body the promised child, who would bring freedom from the very chains of oppression that demanded from her this arduous journey to Bethlehem.

It's not difficult these days, our days, to imagine the kind of oppressed lives that Mary and Joseph must have had. History has provided myriad examples of totalitarian governments, tyrannical dictators, and rebellious militias all claiming the same godlike status attributed to Augustus, all boasting to be a savior for their cause. Even now, we exist in a global community of perpetual division with heralded claims of salvation from across the social and political spectrums. Even now, we watch on endless news cycles as nations brutally impose their will on their subjects and one another, all in the name of "peace." Even now, we witness the growing disparity between the privileged and the disenfranchised as political, economic, and social systems not only allow but encourage and protect the hoarding of wealth and privilege by the powerful, often at the violent expense of the poor and the marginalized. And, just as in "those days...of Augustus," even now these kinds of systems wound all that exist within them, distorting the way we see one another by centering competition, control, and domination in human relationship.

And so perhaps, in our days, it is not so difficult to imagine experiencing time as much more than passing days on calendars and the constant ticking-by of seconds, minutes, and hours. That in the context of violence, strife, and power struggles, time is felt deeply in our guts and our bones as the reality around us presses up against the yearning for something new, something different; something more just, more life-giving, more whole. This is the kind of time that is pregnant with hope, imagination, and expectation. It swells with Mary's melodious song of divine revolutionary love, of God "casting down the mighty" and "lifting up the lowly." I sometimes wonder if Mary sang her song on their journey, through the pain of her swollen feet, filling the night sky with a balm to their weary souls.

In those days, once Mary and Joseph had reached Bethlehem, time shifted again as Mary went into labor. And, in an unassuming guestroom, shared by household animals, in the middle of an insignificant town, she gave birth to her first-born son, the holy child of God who would forever rule God's people. There, in a small town filled with weary travelers like Mary and Joseph, the Son of God comes into the world, changing everything about "those days," because here, on *this day*, the might and power of God are embodied not in the conquering militant leader but in the vulnerability of a newborn infant. There is no birth announcement sent to the halls of power and governance; no royal decree or ceremony demanding praise or blind allegiance. Instead, there is only a field covered by the night sky and humble shepherds keeping watch over their flock.

No doubt these shepherds also knew the weight of time in "those days." Despised by the elite of society, they were seen as thieves and vagabonds. They too would have carried in their bones the heaviness of scarcity, the fear of constant uncertainty. Perhaps on *this night*, they had been watching their flocks while agonizing over the economic and political consequences that would inevitably follow this "world-wide" census. Perhaps they were weighed down with more immediate concerns: how will I feed my family? How can I keep them safe? Whatever they were contemplating in the depths of this night, it was interrupted by the brilliance of divine glory, and the joyful angel's announcement, and the chorus of heavenly host breaking out in song to praise the God of peace. The worries and cares and hardships and suffering of "those days" were interrupted by *this day, this night*, in which angels proclaim, "Do not be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. For *today* in the city of David, a Savior is born to you." Here is the one who brings with him a new order, a new way of life characterized by peace, by health and wholeness, by justice and reconciliation.

"Do not be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy for *all people*..." All people will experience this new time, inaugurated at the birth of this child, who is the revealer of God's glory and the bringer of true peace among all people. All people will be freed from the tyranny of injustice because of this infant-king who compels allegiance to himself not through mechanisms of fear and intimidation but through dwelling in love among the disenfranchised and the despised. Fear characterizes "those days" just as it characterizes "these/our days:" fear of political unrest; fear of losing our freedoms; fear of senseless murder; fear of scarcity; fear of an impartial virus; fear of difference.

I wonder if you're experiencing the weight of "these days" tonight. Some of us might *still* be carrying the weight of COVID time, the exhaustion of isolation and loss. Some of us might be carrying the new burden of a first Christmas without a loved one. Some of us might be carrying the weight of a new diagnosis, loss of income, new and growing uncertainties. Some of us are experiencing joyful tears at happy reunions with family and friends, while others are scrambling to change plans last minute because of canceled flights. Some of us carry the burdens of injustice, of being marginalized and ostracized because of class, race, sexuality, gender. Whatever it might be, I suspect there are at least a

few here who are struggling to reconcile the continued presence and nature of “those days” in “these/our days,” particularly in light of the peace and goodwill announced by the angel on “*this day*.”

Tonight, on *this day*, we acknowledge that the fullness of time that birthed a new era can be difficult to recognize. And yet, tonight we are not simply celebrating a single birth that happened over 2,000 years ago. No, tonight we are celebrating the ongoing birth of new time in Christ. We gather tonight to declare with one another and to one another, and to the whole world, that the fullness of time in which God came to dwell among us continues to break into our world; because on *this night*, Christ is being born anew in us, filling our bones with songs of freedom, teaching us melodies of God’s revolutionary love, which is already “turning the world around.” [1]

“Do not be afraid... I bring you *good news of great joy*...”

Friends, whatever concerns or worries or fears of “those days,” of “these/our days,” we might be carrying tonight, let us hear once more these glad tidings that in this tiny, vulnerable babe, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a feed trough, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. For *today*, this day, is born to us a child, who is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. Today, *this day*, let us behold the wonder of the angels’ song and open ourselves to the humble and unassuming sign of God’s birth among us. May God’s Spirit enliven not only our hearts but our imaginations so that we too might see the glory of God shining around us and receive the sign of Emmanuel, God-with-us.

[1] I’ve been listening to Rory Cooney’s, “Canticle of the Turning” for the last several weeks, and this line carries the hope of that song. Here’s the version recorded by Chris Brunelle:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5FDu-cG2M8>