

Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she 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.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The Proclamation

In v. 10, the angel of the Lord says, “I bring you good news of great joy for all the people!” This announcement is foundational to all that follows in the New Testament. The Greek word translated “good news” (also “gospel”) is *evangelion*. In the Roman world of Jesus’ day, this was a word used to proclaim the birth of the emperor’s heir or the enthroning of a new emperor. This proclamation, the *evangelion* or “good news,” would be carried out to the Roman provinces by messengers and heralds. Here, the angel of the Lord (in Greek, *angelos* means “messenger”!) brings the proclamation that Jesus is born. Jesus is the Lord, not Augustus Caesar. It is Jesus who will bring “peace on earth,” not Augustus. Even shepherds would have realized the boldness of the angel’s message!

The birth of our Lord is almost upon us.

Do we truly grasp the love embodied in this newborn?

We don't have to look for sweet sentiments or romantic music to speak of love. Indeed, it is best we not speak at all but, instead, look upon the manger and the cross. The Christ-child is the embodiment of God's love, as is the crucified body of the man whom the child would grow to be. This is a love so profound that the depth and reach of it escapes us. The creator of Genesis 1 taking on weak and vulnerable human flesh? Born in the most humble of circumstances? In a word, yes. The truest love of all is exactly that – set right before our eyes.

A commonplace birth

And so the young couple, a carpenter and his pregnant fiancé, made their way southward from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, a small village five miles from Jerusalem. There would be no welcoming delegation, no trumpets, no parades. Instead they would try to get comfortable in a small cave or room where animals were sometimes kept. There, Mary, probably only fourteen or so,

Savior, Messiah, and Lord

God's angels announce Jesus' birth using three titles for the infant (v. 11).

Savior – God had once saved Israel from slavery in Egypt and the Jews waited fervently for a savior who would deliver them from the hated Romans. The Advent carol, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" captures well this cry for freedom, for salvation. Luke's Gospel is written so that we understand that Jesus is not only the Savior of Israel, but of the entire world.

Messiah – This title is simply the English form of the Hebrew *mashia*, meaning "anointed one." Kings and prophets of Israel were anointed. The people awaited the arrival of an "anointed one" from King David's family who would usher in God's kingdom. *Christos*, from which we get "Christ," is simply the Greek word for "anointed one."

Lord – Earlier in his Gospel, Luke prepared us for "Savior" and "Messiah," but not for "Lord." God is the Lord! Jews used "Lord" as a substitute for God's name whenever they read Scripture. What could it mean to apply this title to Jesus? Peter makes this clear at Pentecost. We are to call upon Jesus as Lord for salvation from sin and death (Acts 2:14-41).

would give birth. Nothing was out of the ordinary. Mary would have done what all ancient Palestinian mothers did. She would have cut the umbilical cord, tied it off, and tightly wrapped the newborn in strips of cloth to keep him warm and to help him grow straight. Later, Mary would be visited by some shepherds bearing a most fantastical tale.

In those days, shepherds were only a step above slaves on the social ladder. Yet, they told Mary and her husband that angels had sent them to find a newborn in a feeding trough. But the angels also told the shepherds something much more remarkable. The astonished shepherds told Mary that the angels had been the Lord God's messengers, bearing the Good News, that at long last Israel's Savior and Messiah, the Lord, had been born – and this Lord was Mary's baby.

Pax Romana or Pax Christi?

Preachers will often use Luke's story of Jesus' birth to contrast the humbleness of his birth, this King of Kings, with the priorities and assumptions of our world. For example, everyone in Luke's story is poor and powerless. There are no wise men or expensive gifts, only peasants and shepherds. The important and influential of ancient Palestine are absent. All this is in keeping with Luke's larger portrait of Jesus, for Luke has more to say about the dangers of wealth than do any of the other Gospel writers. Yet, I wonder if we really

get it, if we really grasp the gauntlet that is thrown down at the feet of the powerful by the birth of Jesus.

Jesus was born in about 6BC.¹ For more than two decades, Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, had ruled the empire he created. In the eastern end of the empire, he was even beginning to be worshipped as a god. Under Augustus, the empire enjoyed the *Pax Romana*.² To end one hundred years of civil war, Romans had grabbed onto the peace offered by Augustus. But the peace was enforced by the brutal dictatorship of Augustus, his representatives, and his legions.³ So far as the Romans were concerned, there could be only one Lord, and that was Augustus!

But God's herald angels brought news of a very different peace: Glory to God! Peace on earth! This would not be a peace brought with the edge of a sword but with the birth of a child. The infant lying in the animals' manger is Savior, Messiah, and Lord. The peace the angels proclaim, the *Pax Christi*, is more than a feeling of rest. It is more than goodwill with our neighbors. This peace is the long-awaited salvation that has now come to earth. This peace, this *shalom*, is the wholeness and well-being of restored persons and a renewed creation. The *Pax Christi* could not coexist with the *Pax Romana* then and it cannot now. The world cannot be divided up into that which is God's and that which is Caesar's. Jesus' challenge to the earthly powers is as direct now than it was then. After all, what is not God's!? There is and can be only one Lord.

Here are a few reflection as we approach Christmas Eve:

1. Though we try to domesticate this story so that it fits our nativity scenes, it builds into a world-changing challenge. Still, the story has pretty mundane beginnings. The Roman Emperor, Augustus, commands that a census take place in order to clean up the tax rolls. Such clean-ups happened regularly. Mary and Joseph find temporary lodging where Mary will give birth . . . pretty unexciting stuff. It is up to God's angels, God's messengers, to explain all this . . . to put it in context . . . to lay down the challenge. The world was used to Caesar's messengers carrying big news to the provinces. These angels, however, bring Big News of their own: the true Savior has been born. Caesar's world might think that Augustus was Lord, but the world was wrong. The true Lord, the Master of all creation, was lying in a feed-trough in a tiny town about five miles from Jerusalem. How could this be!?!? The news brought by these herald angels is not just for the shepherds or for Mary and Joseph or even just for the Jews . . . this is *Big News* for all humankind.
2. I am always drawn to two questions by Luke's story. *First*, who or what is really Lord of my life? Do I truly admit that Jesus is not only the master of me, but the master of everyone and everything? What does it really mean to confess that Jesus is Savior and Lord . . . in very practical everyday terms? *Second*, what does it mean (to me!) that God bypassed the powerful and

¹The makers of the calendar we use miscalculated the year of Jesus' birth. We know that Herod the Great died in 4BC. Since he ordered the killing of all Bethlehem children younger than two in an attempt to kill Jesus, then Jesus must have been born prior to 4BC.

²In Rome, there was an altar to *pax Augusta*, the peace of Augustus.

³For example, when Jesus was about ten or so, the Romans executed thousands of Galilean Jews to put down a revolt. One can only imagine the effect such brutality had upon the young Galilean boy.

successful at Jesus' birth, choosing instead two very ordinary and inconsequential people? In this birth, God has reversed all my notions of power and importance. How will I reflect this reversal in my own life?

Why December 25?

From its earliest days, the Christian church celebrated Jesus' resurrection at Easter. However, it was several centuries later that Christians began to celebrate Jesus' birth. A common, but probably incorrect, belief is that Christians picked December 25 because it was in the middle of an important Roman pagan holiday celebrating the winter solstice. The problem is that the first mention of a date for Christmas is from about 200AD and the earliest celebrations that we know about were late in the third century – before Christianity became the state religion and began to incorporate pagan customs. There is a better explanation for December 25.

In keeping with Jewish traditions about the prophets, many early Christians believed that Jesus was conceived and died on the same date. One early and prominent Christian, Tertullian, writing about 200AD, calculated that the day of Jesus' death recorded in the Gospels was March 25 on the Roman solar calendar. Thus, March 25 would have been seen as the date of Jesus' conception. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church celebrates the Feast of the Annunciation (the announcement to Mary that she would conceive) on March 25 each year. By 400AD, Augustine was referring to the "tradition" of Jesus' conception and crucifixion being on the same date. December 25 is simply nine months after March 25 and, thus, a very appropriate date to celebrate Jesus' birth.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *The gospel of Luke*

NO CLASS THIS WEEK OF NEXT – WE WILL RESUME ON JAN 6

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts. We will begin 1 Kings on Jan 7*

NO CLASS THIS WEEK OF NEXT – WE WILL RESUME ON JAN 7

On January 7, we will begin a new study of 1 & 2 Kings. Solomon, Elijah, Jezebel and much more. I hope you will join us!

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This week: *A Theological Look at Carols & Hymns*

We will not meet on Dec 29 as there will be on service at 10am in the main sanctuary.

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.