

The Roman Empire ruled the Mediterranean world. Or so it seemed. And this military force enabled Roman officials to do what Roman officials do. They collect revenue. The registration that Luke mentions in our Gospel reading was all about taxes. Their perspective was no taxation without registration. The Old King James Version even uses that word, “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.”

Money and power are written all over the beginning of this account. Even the word *world* in this context gives us the English word *economy*. And they collected—even from insignificant little places like Nazareth and Bethlehem, at the fringes of the empire. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s. And Caesar Augustus’ dominion is extensive. One inscription found among ancient ruins in modern Turkey hailed him as the “savior of the whole world.”

But in Luke chapter two—even as we see the far reach of Caesar’s power—we also see his undoing. And thus, it came about that a village carpenter and his expectant teenage betrothed were forced to travel to his hometown to pay what the empire demanded. And although Caesar would never know it, he had unleashed a chain of events that would turn the whole world upside down.

This one little family, seemingly swept up in the tide of earthly power—just like the rest of us—gave birth to a Son who will rule the world. Mary’s song that we sang throughout the Wednesdays of Advent—her *Magnificat*—was beginning to come true.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.”

Luke knows what he is doing in all of this. In fulfillment of prophecies made to Judah and David—through Micah and Isaiah—as pronounced by Gabriel to Mary, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

There is so much context to this moment. Jesus had to be a direct descendant of King David. This is why the Gospel writers give us genealogies. And although the family lived in Nazareth, He needed to be born in Bethlehem.

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”

It is so ironic. This proud Emperor, Caesar Augustus, becomes the unwitting servant of God’s divine plan. What appears to be a show of Caesar’s power, actually proves the supremacy of God. Even Caesar’s decree becomes a tool of God’s redemptive plan. God rules over all things for His own glory. It is always the way of things. The King of glory is born.

As Luke tells the story of the Nativity, he shows the contrast between the worldly power of Caesar and the humility of the Christ Child. And it is not hard to find the humble elements. The holy family is poor. Nazareth is no great place. The family is rejected as they enter Bethlehem. They end up staying with the animals. The world is a cold hard place as the Christ Child—the true Davidic King—enters the world.

But these elements should cause us to wonder why Jesus was born like this. If God the Father could arrange for God the Son to be born in Bethlehem outwitting and overturning Caesar—fulfilling ancient prophecy and God’s ultimate plan—couldn’t He have found better arrangements for all of this to take place? What does the poverty of His Nativity tell us?

Further, Jesus was virtually unrecognized and unwelcome at His birth. No priest—no king—stood at the cradle in Bethlehem. Now, some Israelites were watching and waiting for the Messiah—Simeon and Anna meet Jesus at the temple later in this same chapter. The Magi visit in a couple of years as we hear in Matthew’s Gospel. Although they are brought supernaturally to Bethlehem.

But most were so preoccupied with their own concerns—work, entertainment, shopping, a bottle to drown their sorrows—that they were unaware of what God was doing in the world. Each detail was carefully laid out in the Old Testament Scriptures. It was all there—but they couldn’t see it—they wouldn’t see it.

Isaiah the Prophet said it well. Dripping with anticipation for this very moment, he says, “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”

John is even more transparent, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”

And Jesus was not only ignored at His birth, He was rejected all through His ministry—right up to the very end. He was driven out of Nazareth by His opponents. His family thought He was a fanatical religious zealot. Those who flocked to His miracles drifted away when He started talking about discipleship. The religious leaders scoffed at Him. It wasn’t just at Bethlehem. There was never enough room for Jesus. When Christ came, the world pushed Him away—and this rejection still goes on today.

Now, the welcome that Jesus receives—or doesn’t receive—has spiritual significance. It shows that He was coming to live in the mess of this world. He is coming to live among sinners. And even with His birth, He demonstrates the humility that will ultimately lead Him to the cross.

And even though His purposes are being fulfilled—just like with Caesar—it is still not right for His advent to go so unrecognized. His birth is utterly unique. He is born of a Virgin. The power of the Most High brings about His conception. His birth was the most important thing that has ever happened—akin to His cross and resurrection. It really has to be celebrated. It has to be explained and understood. The eternal God has taken on our humanity—He has become one with us—to save us from sin.

I have mentioned those who responded so well later on. Simeon, Anna, the Magi. And we will give them some more attention in the weeks to come. There is always a remnant of

believers that God keeps in the faith—that hail Jesus as the true King coming into the world. But there is one other group worth mentioning. And they are the first to arrive.

The first to hear the good news—of the coming of the Christ—the Anointed One—are the Shepherds, of course. They heard the angelic announcement. And they responded with faith. But why did God choose these men to be the first to learn of the true meaning of Christmas?

Various explanations have been offered. There is an obvious connection with King David. He had been a shepherd and he was chosen to shepherd Israel. Jeremiah even hints at this day in Jeremiah 33.

The Prophet says, “In the cities of the hill country...in the places about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the LORD. Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and...Judah will be saved.” By fulfilling this ancient prophecy, the shepherds proved that Jesus was both Christ and King.

But I think there is another reason why the shepherds were chosen—over the likes of Caesar and Herod, the Pharisees and Sadducees. Shepherds were outcasts, humble, poor, exiles in their own land. They were among the lowest class of people in Judea. And their presence and worship at the manger shows that God draws people to Himself. Not just those that the world loves. And not just those who wield the power.

Returning to the Magnificat, we hear, “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

The shepherds were the men God wanted to hear the Gospel. They were the first to make known the Gospel. Working class sinners. People like us. Like everything else about the birth of Christ, this upsets our expectations. We don't even know their names. They are never mentioned again. But if God has grace for them, He has grace for any poor sinner who will come to Jesus in faith. Who will bow the knee before the newborn King.

I like the way that Paul says it in 2 Corinthians 4, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”

This whole story shocks us—once we get past the familiarity—and back into the details. Luke intentionally shows us that Jesus is King—even a King who supplants the kings of this world destined to pass away. His references to the ruling classes at the beginning of this account aren't merely efforts to ground all of this in history. As important as that is.

A new King has come into the world. Caesar is not the savior of the world. Caesar is not lord. A much better Savior—a much better King—has come on the scene. And He offers a peace which the kings of this world cannot bring. His power is made perfect in weakness. And He enters into our world to overturn the order of the world. And to bring about a new kingdom full of humility and grace. He comes to rule and reign in a kingdom that will not end.

But let's take this one step further—and bring this story into our own times. Jesus didn't just come to be a first century King. And the angels weren't just interested in calling the Shepherds to the Manger. The message is for us as well. And the whole thing is a call to faith in this Jesus—conceived by the Holy Spirit—born of the Virgin Mary.

I have taken to using the word *allegiance* when talking about faith. Faith is knowledge. It is assent. It is trust. But it is also allegiance. It is a willingness to do what our King says—to follow where He leads—to be associated with Him in the world—come what may. I often think this is what is missing from our lives when it comes to faith. But it is all over the Scriptures. It is right here in this story. We can see it in the response of the shepherds. And Luke calls us to the same.

Now, many in the world are perfectly fine with Jesus in the manger. The whole Christmas thing is just so sweet. We like babies in the church—and rightly so. We are fine with Jesus *in the manger*. But are we fine with Jesus on the throne? The story doesn't end on Christmas. We are really just getting started. Jesus doesn't stay a Child. And our thinking needs to mature as well. He comes to be King. It is written in all these details that we have explored today.

In our Christmas hymn, *Joy to the World*, we sing, “Let every heart prepare *Him room*.” True enough. Let's do better than those ancient citizens of Bethlehem. Let's do better than Caesar and Herod. The Christmas story must absolutely capture our hearts. This is a time for passion and sentiment.

But let's take this another step. In *Hark the Glad Sound*, we sing, “Let every heart prepare *a throne*.” And you will find this sentiment throughout our hymns. Jesus is born to be King.

And here is where the angels call us to be. Kneeling before our King. Submitting our lives to His reign. Jesus is the Heavenly King. He rules and reigns over the kingdoms of this world. He now sits enthroned in heavenly splendor—with the glory He had with the Father before the worlds began.

This is the Jesus that Caesar missed and that the shepherds greet. This is Christ the King. Haste, haste to bring Him laud. The Babe, the son of Mary. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+*Soli Deo Gloria*+