

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 24, 2009
Christmas Eve
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

When you read the Gospel of Luke, you cannot help notice that he is very concerned with historical details. From the beginning of his Gospel we know that he has a specific agenda in this regard. It's almost as if Luke wants to show that the events he describes actually and factually occurred on the stage of the world just as we know it and among people just like us.

Nowhere do we see this as clearly as in the birth of Jesus.

Historians indicate that the mood of the first century was one of great expectation. People were looking for a great ruler to arise. The Jews were expecting a Messiah, the Romans an Emperor, and the peoples of the East a great King. Everyone was looking for someone to establish peace and justice.

For many, Caesar Augustus seemed to be that person. He brought the Roman senate under his control, and he defeated his enemies. As the sole commander of the Roman military, he extended the law and order of Rome over the entire Mediterranean region. He ushered in what we know today as the "Pax Romana," or the "peace of Rome." He was hailed as a "savior," and as "lord."

It is into this empire of Augustus that Jesus was born. While the eyes of all were fixed on Rome, Luke tells us that in a corner of an obscure town a “savior” and “Lord” of an entirely different nature is born.

The record of this birth is not ostentatious or flashy. On the contrary, it is rather untidy. In obedience to the summons for a census to be taken, Mary and Joseph must travel from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, a distance of about 60 miles. Not an easy or safe journey for a pregnant woman.

Luke tells us that upon their arrival in Bethlehem, Mary’s pregnancy came to term. Ready or not, she was having her child, and there was no room in the inn. The only place Joseph could secure was a stable. And there Mary delivered the child.

Just outside the city in the open country, an angel of the Lord appeared to some shepherds. The angel declared to them: “behold I bring you good news of great joy! Today is born to you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!”

And with these words, Luke has drawn for us a vivid contrast. A contrast of two lords, two saviors. There is Caesar Augustus, and there is Jesus.

Why would Luke draw this contrast for us?

Perhaps he does it so that we can evaluate our expectations.

Many people have expectations of a savior or Messiah who will exempt them from life, who will free them from pain, suffering, and disappointment.

Expectations that they will somehow transcend life's pain, ambiguity, and heartache. This was what many expected from Caesar Augustus.

But this is not the kind of Savior Luke shows us in the birth of the Christ child. The birth of Christ is not a promise to us that we can now safely pin our hopes on a life free of pain and risk. The birth of Jesus is a promise that when life confronts us with all of its unpredictability and confusing experiences, God is now WITH us in an important way.

The story of Jesus' birth can show us a good lesson about our own spiritual lives. Often, when everything in life feels ordered, when we feel safe and happy and successful, when we feel in complete control, we have little room for God. We are less interested in what God might be doing or what God might want of us.

But, when life feels like it is falling apart, when we feel pain or guilt, when we find ourselves losing control, we think, "what a mess. I've got to find a place to work this all out."

And God says, "I have a place, and I'll work it out."

That place is the manger. The manger reminds us that God comes to us in our messed up lives and is not afraid to get his hands dirty.

The manger is the place where God reminds us that our sins do not intimidate him.

The manger is the place where we learn that God is not allergic to our reality.

The manger is the place where God reminds us that he is not waiting for us to get everything prepared -- he is coming NOW.

And he comes not to lift us *above* life's pain with some sterile, antiseptic salvation. He comes as Emmanuel, to be WITH us and to see us *through* life with grace, with mercy, and with love.

So rejoice. Give thanks. And welcome again to your heart and life this one who comes to live in us and with us.

“Behold I bring you good news of great joy! For today is born to you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!”

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.