

December 8, 2019

National Presbyterian Church

“Shining Light on the Subject”

Luke 2:1-20

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In our sermons through the fall and winter we are looking at the story of Jesus through the eyes of one of the four accounts that we have in the Bible:

The Gospel (“Good News”) according to Luke. And as we approach Christmas, we’re returning to the beginning of the story in Chapters 1 and 2.

Last Sunday, in Luke 1, we looked together at the story of a young woman called Mary and her call to be the mother of Jesus: the amazing noticing and elevating by God of an average person; the incredible work of God *giving her eternal significance* as an act of grace, a free gift.

And what I said among other things last week, was that “*we are ALL called to be Mary*” too. That is, the early Christians saw themselves as “bearers of Jesus” who carried Jesus within their bodies, allowing him to grow within them. So that, as with Mary, Jesus’ life could overflow from their lives into the world. And this is what God wants to do with us, too, as a free gift. Not as something we earn or deserve – but as a gift . . . to come and live *within* us, and to overflow *from* us into the world.

But we need to be clear here: that just because “Mary is all of us,” she is not therefore *any less historical*. What I mean is that Mary is not merely an idea or a concept that we are to emulate in some way. She’s not merely some sort of metaphorical or mythical figure. No. She’s a real person, to whom something divine, but real – something supernatural but down to earth – *truly happened*.

For example, last week, I mentioned that Mary also appears later in the Gospel story as a normal parent who gets upset when her Son leaves the carpenter shop and begins preaching, teaching and healing. It’s as if, for a moment, at least, she forgets the miraculous call of the angels and simply wants *her boy*, Jesus, back home again! (see Luke 8:19-21 with Mark 3:21).

And the story tells us as well that she has other children for whom sibling rivalry is real (John 7:3-5; Acts 1:14). To begin with – they too think that Jesus has gone nuts, but with time, at least one of them (and maybe more) change their minds, and join in. In fact, one brother called James, becomes a leader in the early church (Galatians 1.19) after Jesus’ death and resurrection and this fact is even mentioned outside the Bible by the Jewish historian Josephus, writing at the end of the 1st century and who mentions both Jesus and brother James in the context of James being stoned to death because of his faith. Let me paraphrase what Josephus writes:

The High Priest Ananus, was a Sadducee (that is, a person who did not believe in the concept of resurrection) and he had a temper, and was rigid in bringing judgment on offenders, above all the rest of the Jews. So when [the Roman Governor] Festus was dead, and [the new Governor], Albinus, was [out of town] on the road, Ananus assembled the Jewish court, and brought before

them *James, the brother of Jesus who was called Christ*, and some others, accusing them of breaking the law of Moses, *and he delivered them to be stoned to death.*

Josephus Ant.20:9

My point is this: that in reading about Mary (and her family) we're dealing with real history. Which is especially important to remember as we look *not only* at Mary *but* at the story of the birth of Jesus, which can so easily move in our minds (because of *all its angels and halos and wise men from the east*) into the realm of myth and fairy tale – if we are not careful. And it's as if Luke, even in the first century, anticipated this kind of problem; and to counteract it, he deliberately *shines the light of historical truth* on the whole story of Jesus, including his birth, in at least two more ways.

1st of all he does this in his introduction to the whole book

In the opening words he writes this (Ch.1, v.1) – p.830

Since many have undertaken to set down **an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,**

³ I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

In other words, Luke speaks about getting to the bottom of the facts about Jesus, and he speaks re eyewitnesses of real events, one of whom, almost certainly, was Mary. So Luke is explicit about his interest in the facts.

2. But then, second, Luke *grounds his story in history and chronology.*

He points out quite deliberately that it was *at a particular moment* in history that Jesus was born; at a time when a man called Caesar Augustus (the adopted Son of Julius Caesar) became the first Emperor of Rome.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar (Emperor) Augustus that all the world should be registered (for taxation purposes)

Now the exact dating of this taxation census has always been a bit tricky to define precisely, though we know that this is something Augustus did through Quirinius. But about the dating of Augustus, there is no doubt. Augustus ruled the Roman Mediterranean world for 54 years, from 31BC to AD 24; from before the time of Jesus and all the way through his childhood.

So Luke brings Augustus into the picture to ground the story of Jesus in real history. But not only that: in telling us the story of Jesus' birth side by side with Augustus, Luke places before us quite deliberately a staggering contrast between the kind of rule that Jesus intended to bring, and the kind of rule that Augustus brought – which was **a mixture of brutality and brilliance.**

In 4 B.C., for example, one of Augustus' generals, named Varus, put down a Jewish uprising in Jerusalem by crucifying 2000 rebels (no social media in those days but 2000 crosses made up for that): the stench of corpses and the visual evidence and message of Augustus' power – “don't tread on me” – was everywhere. Inescapable. Think of ISIS and their reign of terror.

BUT then, on the other hand, it was through Augustus that peace and prosperity (what was known as the “pax Romana”) came to huge areas of the ancient Mediterranean world. And it was because of that peace that the Good News of Jesus, within 30 years of Jesus' life, was able to be spread so easily from Jerusalem to Rome; and perhaps even further, to Spain.

In fact, so powerful and revered was Augustus – that his name remains on our calendar to this day (the month of August is named for him!), and on the coins of his own day, he is called “**Son of God**” (divi filius), and the **Pontifex Maximus** (*the Great Bridge* or High Priest connecting humans to the gods). And on one stone inscription dating from 9BC, found at a place called Priene in modern day Turkey, a request was made by local officials, just a few years before Jesus’ birth, for the whole calendar to be changed, and to revolve around Augustus. The inscription names Augustus as a . . . “**Savior,**” with *the day of his birth* being a day above all other days: a day of supreme “**Gospel**” or “**Good News**” (*euangelios*).

The inscription reads like this:

-- Since Providence, which has ordered all things, and is deeply interested in our life, has set (the world) in-most-perfect-order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him **as a savior**, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war (DR: *i.e., be a “prince of peace”*) and arrange all things;
-- And Since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not leaving to posterity (in the future) any hope of surpassing what he has done;
-- And Since the day of the birth of **the god Augustus** was the beginning of **the good news** for the world that came (into existence) by reason of him,” *be it resolved . . .*
(DR: loosely . . . *we want to change the calendar to begin with him . . . !!*)

So this was the stature of Augustus Caesar, his brutality and brilliance, in the world of Jesus’ day. **And what Luke wants us to know** is not only that

- Someone else was “really” born in those days;
- But that “this someone else” rivalled and ultimately surpassed Augustus’ stature and rule in brilliance but not brutality

And so he writes (2:1ff) not only about Augustus (“*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus*”), but also about this other person – Jesus – and his birthday, like this:

⁸ In that region -- there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord (“glory” is the light emanating from God) shone around them – and they were terrified.

[DR: as they would have been in the presence of Augustus. This angel, like Augustus, was no baby cherub, but effused a sense of power!]

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see—I am bringing you **good news of great joy** for all the people. ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David **a Savior**, who is the Messiah the Lord

[DR: in other words, the real king, the real emperor, in contrast to the claims of Augustus].

And this will be a sign for you. You will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger

The comparison and contrast is stunning. Augustus’ agents and army created terror – and deliberately so: he ruled by intimidation NOT joy. With Augustus, the only reason why one of his emissaries would ever deign to approach people like the shepherds would be to get something out of them, or to do them harm.

But while *the angel* was just as intimidating as Augustus or his generals, his intent is not to create terror and cow the shepherds into submission, but rather, to calm their fears:

“Fear Not!” he says. “Do NOT be afraid.”

That is: “I’m not out to harm you: I’m on your side. I’m for you: I’m the bearer of Good news of sheer joy.”

And further, when it comes to the presence of the new born king himself, there’s NO intimidation factor there at all! Not even a semblance of power or authority. Instead the shepherds are told “you’ll find him -- not in a palace, or a bed but out back or down below with the animals – lying in a manger.”

In other words, the whole contrast between Augustus and Jesus was patently absurd; almost a cartoon; a kind of a mockery of Augustus’ pomp and glory. But at the same time – there was an unmistakably clear message: a declaration to any who would listen, that despite the evidence of common sense and reason

- The Real SAVIOR of the World
- The Real MESSIAH KING
- The Real EMPEROR LORD
- The Real PONTIFEX MAXIMUS – THE “Great Bridge” between humans and God was NOT Augustus, BUT the BABY!

It was the baby in the manger the one born of powerless parents, pushed and pulled by the forces of Rome, and forced to travel to Bethlehem by the decree of the very one who seemed to wield all the power . . .

It was the baby in the manger (declared the angel), who was the one who had the real power

- to bring more order to our chaos
- more meaning to our lives
- more of the right laws to the universe
- and more peace and joy to the world

than any Pax Romana that Augustus, or any political leader like him could ever bring.

But let me clarify something: Luke – and indeed the Bible as a whole never encourages us to withdraw from the world of Augustus or to offhandedly dismiss Augustus and his kind. Rather, just to keep him in perspective.

Augustus was important! As I mentioned: God used him and the political peace he brought to the ancient world, as a vehicle for the propagation of the Gospel in the decades that followed, and some of the earliest believers played their part in the armies of the empire of Rome (see Luke 7:1-10; Acts 10), and Luke tells us that the Apostle Paul was not opposed to asserting his Roman citizenship when it was beneficial (Acts 16:37-38).

The early Christians played their part in the world of Augustus – as Jesus told them to do (give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God’s what is God’s. Luke 20:25). And we’ve been called to play our part too in THIS world . . . though without for one moment allowing ourselves to believe that the glitz and glitter of the political world – or the military world; or (let me add) of the technological world; or even of the entertainment world – is WHERE THE REAL ACTION IS! That’s the temptation. That’s the deceit! To think that “Real life, Real news, Real power” is there. When it’s not.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. Luke 2:1

That's the sub-story: . . . Here's the real one, shining bright and clear under the bright light of the angel:

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, **and the glory of the Lord shone around them** – and they were terrified.

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you [THE REAL] **good news of great joy** [for everyone: the powerful and the powerless]. ¹¹ To you is born this day in the city of David a **Savior** [THE REAL one], who is Christ [the REAL Messiah, the REAL King] the Lord.

And [unlikely as it seems,] you can find him as a helpless child wrapped in bands of cloth, and lying in a manger.”

Do you believe it? Will you stake your life on it? There is no more important decision you can ever make this Christmas – or at any other time.

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