

Sermon: Christmas Eve

The Rev. Mike Wernick

December 24, 2014

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

My words tonight... may seem more like a history lesson... than a Christmas Eve sermon... my sermon tonight may seem to be more about the ancient kings of Israel... than about a cooing baby and some barnyard animals and a star in the sky... my reflection tonight may seem to be more about politics... than about Incarnation... but in the end... the Incarnation is political... and if we don't understand that... then we diminish its meaning...

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

Before we can understand the implications of this sentence... we need to understand the Roman sense of *manifest destiny* that was so heavy in the air... you could almost cut it with a knife... and before we can understand that... we need to understand something about the kings of Israel...

The prophet Samuel was old... he made his sons judges over Israel... but they didn't follow his ways...they turned after gain... and perverted justice... the elders of Israel went to Samuel... and asked him to appoint a king to rule over them... Samuel had his doubts... he prayed to God... and God said... *they have not rejected you... they've rejected me from being a King over them... ever since I brought them up out of Egypt... they've forsaken me... they've served other gods... listen to them... but warn them... make it clear just how a king will rule over them...* and Samuel went back... and told them that a king would take their sons and appoint them as his charioteers and horsemen... he would appoint some to plow his ground and reap his harvest... a king

would take their daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers... would take their best fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his friends... it would be an ancient version of pork-barrel politics... a king would take the best of their cattle and donkeys and put them to work...

And God said... in that day you will cry out because of your king... but because of the one who you set *before me*... I will not answer you...

But the people insisted... and Saul came before Samuel... and Samuel anointed him the first King...

A little more than 250 years later... kings were still abusing power... King Ahaz was one of them... 2nd Chronicles says that he reigned in Jerusalem for sixteen years... and that he did not do what was right in the sight of God... he cast images for the Baals... erected altars in the high places... and made offerings...

Ahaz also faced military tensions... the kings of Israel and Aram in the north... asked him to join them against the Assyrians... but Ahaz refused... and there are indications that he even sacrificed some of his sons... tried to appease the Assyrian gods... and prevent the coming invasion... it's no wonder... that the people about whom Isaiah wrote... lived in a land of deep darkness...

But Ahaz had another son named Hezekiah... the author of First and Second Chronicles devotes more attention to him than to any other king... except David and Solomon... and in the first month of Hezekiah's reign... he undid much of what his father had done... he opened the doors of the Temple and repaired them... he brought in the priests and Levites... and told them to sanctify themselves... and the Temple... in other words... he restored Temple worship...

Most modern scholars believe that the titles Wonderful Counselor... Mighty God... Everlasting Father... and Prince of Peace... refer to Hezekiah... because of the light he brought back to the people...

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

Joseph and Mary head for Bethlehem... Joseph's home town... the city of David... about 80 miles away... on a donkey... to be taxed... on one level... this mass-migration just doesn't make much sense... imagine what would happen if every one of us had to travel back to our home towns so we could pay our federal income tax... not everyone here tonight was born in Grand Rapids... I'd be off to Brooklyn, NY... think of the disruption... everyone stopping their daily routines... packing... getting someone to watch their pets... leaving home and work... losing income... the traffic on Rt. 131 and I-96... the airport and train station lines... to effectively go back to wherever... and say... yep... I was born here...

But on another level... their trip makes perfect sense... the powerful are making decisions to strengthen themselves... and in the process... on their journey... Joseph and Mary have disappeared into the anonymity of the powerless... Professor Thomas Long... wrote... *they are faceless nobodies... under the boot of an uncaring empire...* this leader wants more wealth... and when you're poor and powerless... you don't get to say *No* to those in power... whatever the hoops are... or *wherever* they are... you just have to jump through them...

In their book... The First Christmas ... Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan... wrote about Roman power... and how the Romans believed that their empire would be the last in world history... and the pinnacle of greatness... they coveted a belief that this achievement came from the gods... and if we don't understand this... we can't

understand why Rome felt... and was threatened... by the one small baby boy born this night...

I have a friend from Pittsburgh... he's a lover of all things British... in the extreme... his family tree actually includes one of the British kings a few hundred years ago... but that family connection... that ancestry.com information doesn't really get him any special privileges... he may lay claim to a coat of arms... but he has no particular title...

But listen to these titles... Son of God... Lord... Savior of the World... the One Who Brings Peace on Earth... the Light of the World... the God of Light and Reason... these sound like titles by which Jesus would become known... don't they... but in fact... they're the titles that were used to refer to Caesar Augustus... you know... the one who decreed that the whole world should be registered...

Augustus means the One who is Divine... and if tonight's Gospel was read to ancient people... they would have heard: *In those days a decree went out from the Lord who is Divine...* how could Augustus possibly be divine... who pops up in *his* family tree...

Augustus and his great-uncle and stepfather Julius Caesar... belonged to the Julian tribal family... they claimed that they descended more than 1,000 years before... from the goddess Venus and her human consort and warrior Anchises... who fought in the Trojan Wars... their son... conceived in the *usual* manner... was named Aeneas... and it was through Aeneas' son Julius... that Julius Caesar and his great-nephew Augustus descended... so the Caesars didn't descend from mere mortal kings... they believed they literally descended from the gods...

And it was in this world that Joseph and Mary traveled... and into which Jesus was born... a world of ultra-powerful... ultra-wealthy gods whose word... whose whim... was law... a world of contempt for the lowly who barely survived... yet supported those at

the top... a world of violence and torture that demeaned and diminished human life...
for nothing more than a sideways look...

Like those to whom Isaiah wrote 800 years before... those living in Jerusalem... lived in
a land of deep darkness too... that could not only crush life... but could even crush
hope... and into this darkness... painted... as Linda Calder said... painted not in
pastels... but in dust and blood... the true light of God was born...

I said when I began... that my words tonight might seem to be more about politics than
about Incarnation... here's why...

Theologian Mark Douglas wrote that when we depoliticize these texts... when we try to
make them too spiritual... we take a step down the road of depoliticizing the significance
of Jesus' life... death... and resurrection... when we try to make tonight's texts more
about spirituality... we contradict one of the very things that the Incarnation most
strongly affirms... that Jesus' body and actions matter...

And theologians like St. Augustine... John Calvin... and Rosemary Radford Reuther
have shown that what Jesus said and did... has far-reaching implications... not only for
the status of our souls... but for what happens to our bodies... and the Roman Empire
showed us all too clearly... that what happens to our bodies is political...

But what we need to remember... Douglas wrote... is that the coming Kingdom doesn't
depend on our talents or efforts... we're not the ones who bring about the Kingdom...
God does... and this reminder can help those who may be afraid that they have tried
and failed...

But there is one thing that people in this passage from Isaiah do... they see a great
light... their world is no less corrupt... cruel... or confusing than ours... and yet they

see God at work in it... and so any attempt to separate politics from the holy... risks missing the chance to see God working in and through the political world...

Borg and Crossan point out... that the most significant difference between the Empire of Augustus and the Kingdom of Jesus... is that Empire is characterized by violence... and Kingdom is characterized by justice...

The peace which Empire brings is established through intimidation... threat... and murder... like the murders of the 140 Pakistani school children two weeks ago... the peace which Kingdom brings is established through reconciliation... vulnerability... and the giving of life...

Empire is ruled by the kind of intimidation which hacks Sony pictures and threatens theatre goers... Kingdom is ruled by the kind of vulnerability... which may acknowledge that making a movie about killing a nation's leader may have been unproductive...

The peace which violence brings is temporary at best... Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: The ultimate weakness of violence... is that it is a descending spiral... begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy... instead of diminishing evil... it multiplies it... you may murder the liar... but you cannot murder the lie... you may murder the hater... but you cannot murder hate... Returning violence for violence adds deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars... only light can drive out darkness... only love can drive out hate...

And the peace that love and justice brings is a lasting peace... it's the peace that's reflected in the *Magnificat*... it's the peace that comes when no one has too much and no one has too little... it's about the end of *this* era of violence and injustice...

During our seven week Advent... we've been anticipating not only this night... but the meaning it has for all of God's creation... but there are still some in the world who aspire

to be like Augustus... and too many who want a human king to rule over them... more than they want a Divine King to live inside of them...

The Good News... is that Jesus came for those... as Fr. Homeyer said on Sunday... who are not so full of themselves that they have no room inside for God... the Good News... is that the Creator of the world... would condescend to be born as one of us... to re-create the world again... the Good News... is that God is already making all things new... and establishing a reign of justice and righteousness... even... and perhaps especially... tonight.

Arise... shine... your light has come... Merry Christmas!

Mike+